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No. 48

# Science Fantasy

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**VOLUME 16**  
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# Science Fantasy

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*John Brunner's latest story deals with a man who has a unique accomplishment—he is a “visualiser.” By looking at a plan or model of a building he can mentally get inside it and work out what is wrong with the design. It leads his central character, Joel Sackstone, into an intriguing adventure.*

# THE ANALYSTS

BY JOHN BRUNNER

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## o n e

Joel Sackstone brought his small red car into the ground-level bay of the parking block and braked within the space outlined in white on the waiting pallet. On the left, the wheels were sixteen and a quarter inches from the line, both front and rear; on the right, they were sixteen and five-eighths inches from the line. That was one of the things Joel could do.

When he had switched off the engine, he looked up into the artificially-lit recesses of the building. Like cells in a gigantic beehive, the girder-framed compartments stretched twenty storeys high. Nine out of ten of the compartments already held their cars.

For the few seconds when he was staring upwards Joel seemed to be in a state of absolutely total repose—his expression, which was almost always a sleepy one, slack to the point of being comatose, his gangling limbs relaxed like a rag-doll's. That was another of the things he could do.

Simply by looking at him, it was not possible to place him. His large face, fresh-complexioned, with its sandy eyebrows and the thick sandy hair cropped short above his wide forehead, suggested he might be a countryman; so did his big-knuckled hands, except that where one looked for the skin to be calloused it turned out to be quite white and soft. There was more sandy hair on the backs of those hands, and also there were freckles.

His clothes, on the contrary, indicated that he was a city-dweller and city worker. His face and build would have brought overalls to mind, or thornproof country tweed. Nonetheless he wore a narrow suit of conservative cut, dark, with a dark bow tie and gleaming brown shoes.

Consequently people made extraordinary wild guesses when they were asked to categorise him; someone had once said he was probably an agricultural correspondent for a television company, someone else had said—at random—he was probably a publisher. He wasn't. He was a unique specialist.

His moment of repose past, he got out of the car and handed his parking fee to the attendant in the little hutch beside the entrance. The man made change and turned to his control board, which glittered with little red lights showing empty compartments. As his hand fell on a switch, Joel spoke gently.

"No—if you do that you'll have to move seven cars. If you start with G9 you only need move four. See?"

The attendant hesitated, studying the board. A light dawned on him. He nodded and said thanks.

That was another of the things Joel could do.

It took only a couple of minutes for his loose-limbed stride to eat up the distance from the parking block to his destination—a tall bronze and glass office building that had acquired a certain air of traditional solidity alongside its newer neighbours in jade-green, magenta and raw umber. Either side of the entrance were plaques of anodised aluminium indicating the names of the firms trading there.

Although he was a regular visitor, he glanced at the plaque which read *Hamilden Partners, Architectural Consultants*, and a faint frown came to his face. It lasted all the time he was crossing the lobby, all the time he was in the lift, and right up to the moment when without having to wait he was shown into Eric Hamilden's office.

Eric Hamilden had been a bright young revolutionary in his business ten years ago. Now, past forty and getting fat, he had grown a solemn dark-brown moustache as a concession to his new status as senior partner of his own company, but to Joel—who had known him a long time—there was always something of the diffident, excitable youth about him. Today it was more marked than usual.

He started on the conventional how-nice-to-see-you's, but Joel cut him short as he dropped into an armchair facing Eric's desk.

"You've got troubles," he suggested.

Disconcerted, Eric blinked and brushed self-consciously at the bristles on his lip. "How did you guess?" he parried.

Joel waved one hand. "Guessed is all. Let me know the worst. Planning Commission? County Council?"

"Neither. A client problem."

"They're always the worst," sighed Joel. "But you never met one you couldn't handle, did you?"

"There's always a first time," said Eric, so soberly that Joel sat up and took notice.

"Go on!" he urged.

"Did you ever hear of some organisation called—ah—the Foundation for Study of Social Trends?"

"Not that I remember. Are they the clients?"

"They are indeed. In fact, you're going to meet a couple of their people this morning, and you're going to tell them where they get off."

A trace of bewilderment drawing together his sandy eyebrows, Joel objected. "I can't do that, Eric—not without knowing what's going on. *Why* are they being troublesome?"

Eric picked a cigar from his desk, leaned back, and began to peel off the cellophane and the band. He said, "Well, they first came to us about—five weeks ago, it was. They have a site, apparently, about forty or fifty miles from London, on the outskirts of a village, and they want to put a new headquarters there. I imagine, though I'm not sure, that it's not just going to be an administrative headquarters; it'll be something of a research clinic, to judge by the fitments and furnishings they require."

Joel gave a slow, satisfied nod. "I see. Amateur dictators again."

"Yes—but not *just* amateurs. I mean, whether it's the archaic log-cabin instinct or whatever, everybody thinks he knows how to build a house ; usually all you have to do is to point out that he's forgotten to put the stairs into his plan, or explain that he wouldn't want visitors having to go through his wife's bedroom every time they washed their hands. And once you catch him on an elementary point of this sort, he's so embarrassed he leaves it to you and you get on with it.

"Well—these people aren't plain amateurs. In actual fact they're very good indeed. Instead of turning up with plans, they brought a scale model twelve feet by nine, as professional a job as I could get done here in the firm. And thanks to working with you so often, we're specialists in model-work."

"You started it," Joel corrected mildly. "But—go on. I can tell you're coming to a point."

"Well, yes. Of course, this model impressed me ; in fact I thought at first glance it *was* a professional job and that they might have disagreed with some other firm and come to me with it to get a lower tender. Only it wasn't professional after all. On looking at it closely it turned out there were some flaws—minor ones, but definite flaws, which would make the job of construction unnecessarily difficult as well as blowing up the cost."

"Such as what ?"

"The differences in level are the most significant ; there are no less than seven different levels of floor. I thought, till I actually went out to the site to see, that whoever had prepared the model had accommodated himself to the lie of the land—which would have been right and proper and if there was a lot of muck to be shifted might even have kept costs down. Preparing the ground for the foundations averages eight to eleven per cent of the labour-budget on jobs like this, you know."

"Only the land doesn't lie that way ?"

"It does not ! Fitting their model on the space available, it's going to take twenty-foot piling at one place to hoist the floor up where they want it. That's another thing, by the way ; they want the building aligned to within one degree, major axis running due east-west and no mistake. Anybody would think they were Japanese and went to bed by the compass."

"What's wrong with that ?"

"Means the wrong elevation gets the sun. Yet there's no reason I can see for not shifting the whole thing fifteen degrees or so—which would fit the site better anyway—and levelling off the floor. Mark you, there are other things too. There's a lot of space wasted on the east wing, and there's a false shell-roof over it which is going to be the devil's own job to scaffold while building. Oh, it could be done, no denying. But it'll cost them an extra three thousand at least."

Joel grunted. "If you can say all this yourself, why bother me?"

"They're absolutely immovable. They say flatly—either build it our way, or let us go somewhere else." Eric looked unhappy. "You know how I feel about turning in a job that's not as good as I can possibly make it—maybe it's not good business-sense, but it's the way I work."

Joel hauled himself to his feet. "Where's this model?" he demanded. "Let me see for myself."

"In the boardroom. We've got a couple of minutes before the clients get here, and I'd really like your views."

The model was superb, right down to the colour-scheme of the walls and furnishings. The roof lifted off first, then the upper floor from half of its roughly cross-shaped layout. Joel nodded his experienced approval of its quality.

"If you could knock up models like this for me to work on, Eric," he said banteringly, "my job would be half as difficult. Damn it, they've even got a couple of pictures on the walls no bigger than postage-stamps."

"I noticed those," Eric agreed. "But here's the site-plan, do you see? Notice how the rise of the ground at present goes directly contrary to the layout of the east wing."

Joel's acute power of visualisation converted the stark contour lines on the map Eric was displaying into information so real it was like actual experience. A rising bank there; a ridge there; two deep gulleys there . . .

"You're absolutely right," he said. He rubbed his chin with the back of his knuckles in a puzzled fashion. "Hang on—I'll just see if there *is* a purpose behind it all."

He bent to the model, narrowing his eyes, while Eric remained quite still and silent. This was the thing Joel did best of all and better than anyone else, the thing which had made him a unique specialist. He could work from plans if he



had to, but a scale model like this saved him asking a hundred supplementary questions.

What he could do was get inside the model. Reach for a door-handle and find it an inch too high for comfort. Open a window and discover that it caused a draught where people would likely sit. Turn on a light and find that he shadowed what he wanted to read. Wash up at a sink and find that his elbow knocked a dish off the draining-board, or switch on a washing-machine and realise that the power-point was sited a yard too far along the wall. Count his steps between door and door and note that he had to change hands to open the second one—awkward if he were carrying anything heavy, irritating at all times.

These were the things he could put right. This was how he made his living.

## t w o

He was inside this model now. Consciously, deliberately, he was erecting the finished building about himself. He began at the entrance because that was where experience of a building would in any case begin. Recognition of the exterior. Rough-cast walls and that peculiar shell-roof on the east wing. The extraordinary lack of co-ordination between the building and the ground on which it was set, introducing a jarring note at once.

The main door . . . He hesitated for a second, debating whether to be let in or to go in. He glanced at Eric.

"Give me some idea of the work that will go on here," he suggested.

"Ah—I know very little about it," Eric confessed. "But I believe they analyse news-stories, deduce things from the ways there handled, then test their theories on volunteers. Sort of social-psychological research, I gather."

Joel felt blank for a moment. Then he shrugged. All right. He could experience this as one of the volunteer subjects, and let the details go hang.

Open the door. Someone—a secretary—taking his name, asking him to wait in the curiously-shaped main hall, which was mainly light woods and textured plastic. Windows with a view of trees.

In imagination, he walked about the hall. Good. Original. Craftsmanlike. Only . . .

He had been there a little longer now ; he knew his way about. Perhaps he was a member of the staff. Twenty newspapers making a huge bundle under his arm, he went up the flight of opentread steps at the far side of the hall and turned naturally the way they seemed to indicate.

Towards a blank wall.

Startled, he tried again. This was a thing he could experience vividly—the logical thinking behind a structure. A staircase, he felt, should imply its destination ; a passage likewise, or an entrance-hall.

Yes, no doubt about it. That flight of steps logically led to a blank wall. A point worth correcting. He made a mental note of it and went on walking. Turning right at random, he went up a step and into one of the big-windowed rooms around the exterior of the upper floor. Change of level.

There were several of these rooms, interconnected. Their shape had a definite implication of direction. By that, he meant that they suggested to someone who wasn't thinking about where he was going that he should go a particular way. The reasons for this sensation were complex ; partly, they were to be found in lines created by the furniture and walls, which narrowed perspective-wise towards a distant point.

Arbitrarily he made the time midday in summer, and looked at the shadows.

They also pointed in the same direction.

Eastwards.

With sudden rising dismay, he returned to the puzzling stairs which had seemed to him to lead to the wall and nowhere else. That too was eastwards—east of the stairhead.

*Accident*, he thought at first. Then : *No. This is too consistent to be an accident !*

What was beyond that wall, then ? He figured it out. One of the upper rooms ; you could get to it through *that* door, and there was this other change of level and the logical way to turn when you had passed through was—eastwards again . . .

In a room with very ordinary furniture, decorated conventionally enough but with a strange subtle compulsion in it which no one would see unless he were deliberately hunting for the petty irritations and bothers which spring from minute inconvenience, Joel Sackstone figured that he was supposed (supposed ? By whom ?) to turn left, go up that little step, turn, go a pace forward . . .

His mind suddenly shrieked silently. That was the way ! But that was not a way at all !

"Joel ! What the—?"

Abruptly he was back in the boardroom, with Eric Hamilden clutching at his arm ; he had come close to falling on his face across the model on the long table. He was sweating, and he thought his teeth were going to start chattering.

"Joel !" Eric said again.

"I'm all right," Joel said with an effort. He straightened up, and his head seemed so far from the floor he was dizzy. "I don't know—what happened. Bit faint for a moment, I suppose."

Anxious-faced, Eric urged him towards one of the chairs arranged at the end of the table. "Sit down for a moment," he said. "Have you been ill at all ? You looked ghastly."

Joel was going to say something more ; at that moment, though, the door opened and a pretty brown-faced girl looked in.

"Oh, you're here already, Mr. Hamilden," she said with relief. "Mr. Angelus and Miss Bailbrook just arrived. Shall I show them in ?"

Eric hesitated, glancing at Joel.

"Oh, I'm all right now," Joel insisted—and he was, except that the astonishing thing the model had done to him was still making his mind reel like a dying top. Eric gave him a lingering uncertain glance before making his mind up.

"Yes, Tracy," he said to the girl. "Bring your pad and join us. And get Mr. Low as soon as he's free."

The girl nodded and disappeared.

"These are the clients?" Joel suggested, knowing the answer. Eric nodded, and he put on a grim expression.

"I look forward to meeting them," he said. "Because—make no mistake, Eric—this job they've done is for a reason. All for a reason. I don't know what the reason is, but I'm burning to find out !"

Eric was so taken aback that he still had not formulated the question on his lips before Tracy returned with the clients.

Mr. Angelus was a dark, saturnine man of forty or so, rather slim, who moved with a grace suggesting he might have been of Indian descent. He wore a light grey suit and a mauve tie, and carried a large portfolio.

Miss Bailbrook, in contrast, was extremely fair. Long hair pale as corn-silk was coiled on her nape and held by fashionable magnetic clasps of rich blue cobalt steel. Her narrow face was dominated by large eyes and a wide but thin-lipped mouth ; it could not have been called pretty, but certainly it was a very interesting face because of its vivid mobility. Her expression never seemed to stay the same for more than a second or two ; as she entered the room, a smile of thanks to Tracy for guiding her and her companion, a smile of greeting to Eric, a look of inquiry in respect of Joel, a look of recognition of the model on the table, a look of expectancy at Mr. Angelus.

Joel studied the two new arrivals thoughtfully as Eric saw them seated, as Tracy took a chair in the background with her notebook open, as Christopher Low—Eric's costing expert, whom Joel had often worked with—came from his office to join the discussion, bringing a package of papers.

"We're fortunate to have Mr. Sackstone with us today," Eric was saying, and Miss Bailbrook's eyes met Joel's as he spoke. Those eyes matched the cobalt clips in her hair, exactly ; they were the darkest blue Joel had ever seen.

Almost, it seemed he could hear a clash as he met her gaze, like two swords struck together. For a second there was an expression on her eternally mobile face which said to him as clear as speech, "I think you know too much. I think your sleepy appearance is camouflage. I think you understand more than you are going to admit. Don't meddle with me."

But the look vanished, and Miss Bailbrook was complacently smoothing down the black and white sheath dress she wore as if she had taken Joel's gaze simply as an admiring tribute to her very shapely figure, and Eric was continuing, "Mr. Sackstone, I may say—though he'll certainly deny it from modesty—is without equal in the world as a visualiser."

*Keep 'em off balance.* Deliberately Joel relaxed back into his chair. In his laziest tone of voice, he said, "I wouldn't deny it Eric—not at all. It's merely true."

Taken aback, Eric shot a bewildered glance at him. Into the hiatus Mr. Angelus put a measured question. His voice was deep and purring, catlike.

"What is a visualiser, exactly ? I'm sorry, Mr. Sackstone, but I'm not well up on architects' jargon."

"A visualiser is—" Eric began. Joel cut him short.

"You want to find out what's wrong with a projected building—or what's right with it? You send for me. You give me a model, or just the plans, but if I only have plans I want to know the colour-scheme, the furniture, the purpose, the mean temperature, the environment and all the rest. I will tell you whether the building is going to be ideal for its purpose, and if it's not, why not. You follow me?"

He addressed Mr. Angelus, but obeying some whim of his subconscious he looked directly at Miss Bailbrook.

Something was definitely amiss with Eric's plan for this discussion. He hurried on, "Yes, that's it. Mr. Sackstone can as it were visualise the actual building about him, and discover inconvenient points about its layout which can then be corrected before it's put up. I asked him to sit in on our talk today in the hope of making clear beyond doubt the things which need to—uh—which might at considerable saving be put right in the model you've prepared of your proposed building."

He glanced at Low. "You have the costings, Chris?" he suggested.

Low fanned the papers from his hand to the table. He began to talk persuasively. Joel caught occasional phrases: "This will run to twenty-seven thousand approximately, if you do such-and-such only twenty-four . . . strongly recommend this owing to the economy it will effect in labour charges . . ."

But Joel wasn't listening with attention. He left that to Mr. Angelus, who sat patiently and wearily nodding at what Low had to say, his entire air that of a man whose mind is made up and who refuses to be muddled by facts. Joel's eyes were on Miss Bailbrook. And that shifting face was speaking to him with closed lips.

*You really can do this, can't you?*

Joel smiled, saw that Tracy, pencil poised, saw him smile, and knew she took it for granted that he had been badly smitten at first sight; knew also that with the inevitable automatic judgment of the brown, Tracy felt a stab of envy for all who were pale and fair.

That was bad.

*How much more than what you admit have you done?*

He wasn't going to respond. He folded his hands on his lap and twiddled his thumbs; then he realised that was a response in itself.

*Go on—say it. You're proud of what you've found out because no one else could have done it.*

All right, that was true enough. But he was also frightened by his discovery ; it was astonishing how badly frightened. That direction in which he had been guided—*wasn't* a direction at all ! It was between directions, and this was ridiculous.

Low had finished. Mr. Angelus was shaping his reply, flat denial of all he had heard, and Joel broke in.

"It's no good, Eric, you know," he said. "If there's one thing that building is not, it's a collection of amateur's mistakes."

Eric—and Christopher Low as well—looked as startled as gaffed fish. Eric recovered first. He said, "But, Joel—! The changes of level ! The site ! The—hell, everything !"

Sleepy-eyed, Joel shook his head. "Everything in that building is there for a purpose. *Everything*. That's a unified design job in a class by itself, ahead of anything I ever saw—"

"Joel !" Low snapped. "Have you gone crazy ?"

"I'm telling you, Chris !" Joel sat up in his chair and was abruptly wide awake, sharp-voiced, taut. "There's an air of purpose about that building. It's right from ground to roof. I can't tell you what the purpose is. But it *breathes* purpose like a good machine. If they're willing to pay for it, Eric, you go ahead and build it. Whatever it's actually for, it'll be worth putting up just to find out."

Mr. Angelus beamed on Joel. "A man of superb perception !" he applauded. "I trust you no longer think we are silly amateurs, Mr. Hamilden."

Eric said something which Joel didn't hear. He was staring at Miss Bailbrook, and somewhere deep inside he was chuckling. Because he had startled her out of showing any expression except pure amazement for five whole seconds together.

\*     \*     \*     \*

## t h r e e

Joel was not normally the sort of person who got pleasure from behaving in an unpredictable manner, and his buoyant sense of certainty evaporated bit by bit under the impact of the looks of hurt puzzlement which Eric gave him from time to time during the negotiations that followed. Nonetheless he preserved his air of assurance, and by lunchtime—when Eric had to break off the discussion and go to lunch with another client—he was fairly certain his friend was resigned to deferring to the expert's judgment.

Of course, Eric had never really been able to more than tolerate Joel's criticisms of his work, though he was so sure of their value that he had not undertaken a major scheme for years without consulting Joel first. And it had to be Joel, of course; this wasn't a talent in which you could train a person, but a natural gift. Moreover, Eric was well aware of the head start Joel had given him over some of his rivals, who had only recently got around to retaining him. So . . .

Nonetheless, Joel was not as happy as he had been when he emerged into the fine outdoors again, in company with Mr. Angelus and Miss Bailbrook.

Mr. Angelus was purely delighted with what had happened, and turned to Joel now with a broad smile, extending his hand.

"Your services have been invaluable!" he exclaimed. "The reputation of Mr. Hamilden's firm stands very high, and we were eager that he should handle our job rather than one of his competitors. But until today he was so adamant in his own view that we were beginning to despair."

"He must place great faith in your judgment," Miss Bailbrook murmured. "Tell me—in all honesty, Mr. Sackstone—was he right to say you were the best visualiser in the world? That you're unique?"

Joel felt uncomfortable now before her blue-steel gaze. He shrugged. "I won't claim to be unique," he said. "But I do believe I have a most unusual talent."

"I can imagine." Miss Bailbrook glanced at her companion. "Marco, should we not ask Mr. Sackstone to join us at lunch? After all, I don't think I've ever before met a unique individual."

Mr. Angelus pursed his lips. "A very good idea," he agreed. "Though before extending the invitation, Mr. Sackstone, I ought to warn you that if Letta speaks that way, you'll likely

be—grilled, I think the word is. Our own line of work is a somewhat unusual one, though not as remarkable as yours."

There was nothing Joel wanted more at the moment than to learn something about these extraordinary people. For the sake of appearances he hesitated, and knew that Letta Bailbrook was not in the least deceived.

"I'd be very interested," he said at last.

He was prepared for his companions to question him first, once they had taken their places at table and made their orders. He was equally prepared to hold off until they had told him something about themselves. Accordingly, he parried patiently for some minutes, until Letta Bailbrook gave a sigh and smiled at Angelus.

"I suppose he's entitled to ask first," she agreed. "Well, Mr. Sackstone, we're with a somewhat peculiar organisation. I presume you know its name—the Foundation for Study of Social Trends. It's privately endowed; I can't tell you who by, but I can say it's a famous charitable industrialist. At present we're engaged in trying to reduce the vast mass of what is known—and half-known—about human society to a workable form. We take in individual psychology, mass psychology, politics, economics, religion, culture of all kinds from cheap popular to the most rarefied intellectualism—but we're not just compilers of scrapbooks, which we like to think is what distinguishes us from similar organisations. We're sufficiently wealthy actually to test out our theories. Or we think we are. That's why we're building our new headquarters."

"At present," Angelus chimed in, "we're operating from a suite of offices here in London, but we're forced to rely on friends in various hospitals for experimental facilities, and this is inadequate."

"Experimental facilities?" Joel raised his sandy brows.

"Oh yes." Angelus broke off as the waiter delivered their first course to them; all three were having *cannelloni*, and it came in bright-polished chrome dishes, thickly sprinkled with half-melted Parmesan. Joel was very hungry.

That was perhaps why he missed the significance—at the time—of the glance that Angelus exchanged with Letta.

Picking up his fork, he said, "Please go on."

"Ah—yes!" Angelus seemed momentarily at a loss, but soon caught the thread of his thoughts again. "We have developed—I say 'we,' but we have a staff of almost a dozen experts: psychologists, statisticians, students of political



science, and so on—we have some rule-of-thumb theories which we are now testing out. A great objection to previous work like ours had been lack of control experiments, we found.”

“But how can you experiment with—what do you call it?—a social trend?”

Letta answered with a smile. “Why, one takes a person who is as close as possible to an average, and if he is willing to forego a weekend or a week—well paid, mark you—to help us, we then expose him in miniature to various social situations. We weight everything, the circumstances, the things that are said, the various stimuli—and sometimes the results are helpful, sometimes not.”

“Such as—?” Joel went on addressing her rather than Angelus. He was sure she was the dominant partner.

“One on which we are working here, now,” Letta answered, “is one you yourself have been exposed to this morning.”

Suddenly her face was stern. The change was shocking, for the stern look endured where most of her expressions did not. Joel searched his mind, and hazarded, “Ah—to do with Eric?”

“No . . . The secretary who was taking notes of our conversation.”

The brief look of envy that had passed over the face of the girl Tracy came back in memory to Joel. He nodded.

“In this part of the world today,” Letta pursued, “you have just passed the beginning of a phenomenon which exists elsewhere in full force. About three-quarters of one per cent of the population of Britain is coloured—not enough to make a major problem, but enough for the problem to exist. It has had—what? Fifteen to twenty years to become established, to allow attitudes to harden. But it will be another fifteen before it is truly serious. Meantime, we compared the situation here with the same one elsewhere, where it is more developed, and we draw conclusions.”

“With a view to what?” Joel put down his fork and sat back with a satisfied feeling; the food was delicious. He put it down to too much talking when he saw that Letta had barely touched hers.

“With a view—” Angelus spoke, then hesitated, then resumed. “With a view to curing the sickness of human society, Mr. Sackstone.”

It didn’t fit. Unless . . . He said slowly, “Tell me, Mr. Angelus: that building of yours. Is it a kind of—of maze, like

the ones they put rats in to test their intelligence? Is it all one big psychological experiment?"

Angelus looked curiously relieved for a moment—not for long, but Joel had spent the morning watching the far more mobile expressions that came and went on Letta's face, and he caught it before it vanished. "No," Angelus said. "Not exactly. But we do think it will serve to put people off balance a little. To disturb their habitual ways of thinking and make them more receptive to information."

It could work. Joel had to concede that. A building of this sort could serve as a stimulant, simply because if you didn't know it extremely well it would always be taking you by surprise. But there would have been a hundred simpler ways to achieve such an effect, and a twenty-seven thousand pound building was overdoing it, in Joel's view.

The fact remained: that design was not the work of a bumbling amateur!

Neither Letta nor Angelus had eaten more than a mouthful of their food. The waiter, disappointment plain in his face, took the chrome dishes away and brought the next course. Joel saw with surprise that whatever had kept his companion from enjoying the *cannelloni*, it hadn't been lack of appetite, for they ate their second course with relish.

He said hesitantly, "Curing the sickness of human society is a tall order, isn't it?"

"Very tall. And we have little time," Letta agreed. "We scarcely knew where to start at first. Indeed, we were afraid we would be wasting our time."

There was a movement under the table. Joel was almost sure that Angelus had kicked Letta on the ankle. And that was perhaps more puzzling than anything so far.

"We hope eventually," Angelus said with buttery smoothness, "that we shall establish such a reputation that governments will consult us on the best way to handle their problems. We are in fact compiling information specifically for use at governmental level."

"What else do you tackle?" Joel demanded.

"All forms of intolerance, anything which leads to war and destruction. At present we are concentrating on—as Letta has said—the colour question, and on the Christian paradox."

"The what?"

"The paradox that adherence to a religion can cause on the one hand the most selfless dedication to the cause of human

welfare, and on the other the most ruthless savagery against one's fellow creatures."

Joel gave him a steady look. He said, "To be quite candid—well, I can't figure you out. But I like your ideas."

Letta leaned forward, cobalt-blue eyes glowing. She said, "Mr. Sackstone, it's because some people do like our ideas that we think it's worthwhile going on with them."

Joel grinned at her, sipping his wine. He said, "In a way we're in the same trade, you and I. It's rather rarely that I get a chance to tackle something as big as your new building—most of the things I do are quite simple, like studying a new design for a kitchen and saying that the housewife will have to walk fifty per cent more paces from stove to refrigerator than she has to. Oh, sometimes I get factory plans thrust at me, and I have to spend a month studying how to run a lathe, for example, or a hydraulic press, before I can think myself into the position of an employee and say whether the factory is going to produce contented working conditions. In theory, I can run just about every machine that we've ever thought up—"

He stopped short.

"Go on," Letta encouraged. "This is very interesting. We have very few chances to speak to a unique individual like you, because we deal generally in averages."

Joel said slowly, "Why did I say, 'We've ever thought' and not 'That's been thought up'?"

There was a total silence between the three of them for a long moment. Joel was conscious that they were waiting for him to go on—that they were themselves afraid to say a word in case it was the wrong word.

Wrong? Equals *dangerous*? To whom?

He said, "What direction does your building lead in?"

The silence congealed and became completely frozen. In the heart of it Angelus got unsteadily to his feet, his face pasty.

With difficulty he said, "It was—I'm sorry! The cheese with the first course. I'm allergic to it—"

Joel made to rise also. He said determinedly, "You're not going to weasel out of it that easily! I asked a question and I want an answer—"

"But it's true!" snapped Letta beside him.

And in definite proof that it was true, Angelus went more pale than ever, arched suddenly and with a look of impossible embarrassment over his plate, threw up.

## four

"Joel Sackstone," he said to himself under his breath, "you may be hell on wheels as a visualiser, but when it comes to people you're no damned good."

In pursuance of this opinion he sipped the brandy in front of him.

It was going to take him days to get over the shock he had felt. He had been so certain that he was on to something—he wasn't the kind of person who worried about the Freudian slips he might make in conversation, and it was entirely out of character for him to have placed so much emphasis on a chance choice of words—"we've thought up." *We* as distinct from whom else? No one! Who else was there?

And—well, maybe it sprang from his professional ability to put himself in someone else's place, but the terrible embarrassment Angelus had felt on vomiting in public that way had hurt Joel as acutely as though it had happened to himself. Worse, perhaps, because he'd inflicted it on someone else unthinkingly. Had it not been for his own, Joel's, insistence poor Angelus would have made his way to the decent seclusion of the toilet.

Oh, well—set it against the service they had had from him this morning.

What service?

Well, they'd said they preferred to have their work carried out by Eric Hamilden's company, rather than by any one of umpteen other firms who would have accepted their brief without question.

Why? What special distinction? Joel knew of several firms—none of whom retained him, purely as a point of interest—who would have been delighted to follow clients' instructions exactly, and who would have charged the clients handsomely for the privilege. Yet cost obviously wasn't at stake in this matter; Eric had been eager enough to reduce the expense for them.

Principle, then? What principle? What distinguished Eric Hamilden's firm from the competition? Basic honesty, perhaps; Eric was regarded as very reliable. But then, so were other firms beside his. For every company Joel could think of who might have chiselled Angelus and Letta, he could call to mind another who would have been equally determined to stop hem wasting their money.

Was it a distinction to have employed Joel's own services before anyone else—ten year ago, when Joel was still a student? It would have been flattering to think so. Nonetheless Joel was sure Letta hadn't feigned her lack of knowledge about his work. Angelus? Perhaps. But not very likely.

Which brought it down to . . .

The idea was bred, probably, from what Letta and Angelus had said regarding their work, plus the look of envy he had surprised on Tracy's face when she thought that he had been staring at Letta because he had fallen for her. But it was a valid point, however you looked at it. If Letta and Angelus, and their peculiar Foundation, regarded this as one of the symptoms of mankind's sickness, it might well be important to them. The more so as Angelus looked like a person of Indian descent, despite his Italianate name.

So they might have gone to Eric Hamilden as one of the few people in his field who made it a matter of virtually religious principle to employ on a basis of merit and not prejudice. Who probably leaned over the other way to avoid being suspected of prejudice. Whose personal secretary was Tracy—Tracy what? He didn't know. But he had a valid point.

He moved his glass around on the table in front of him. He'd said to Letta and Angelus that he liked their ideas. He remembered the warmth with which Letta had replied. Liking an idea, theoretically, was a long way from putting it into practice.

And Tracy what's-her-name was indisputably a pretty girl.

Joel Sackstone, age thirty, would have been an architect only he found he had his gift for putting himself in other people's places. He was retained by Eric Hamilden, mainly; he'd gone to Eric when Eric was just branching out on his own, and badly needed, in an overcrowded field, something to give him a lead over his rivals. Joel Sackstone was a lead. Joel ensured that a Hamilden development was *that* much more satisfactory as a living unit than another development—that petty awkwardness never intruded to spoil the pleasure of living. At first he hadn't been perfect; he had a long reach and a man's way of looking at things. So Eric had said to him one day, quite candidly and directly, "Joel, you're remarkable, and you're worth gold to us. But you're not perfect."

There had been a layout which was unsuitable in some rather important respect for mothers bringing up small children. It called to Joel's mind the cartoon of the harassed mother at the Ideal Home Exhibition saying to a salesman, "I want one that a child *can't* work !

So Eric had said, "Get yourself a girl, Joel !"

Fair enough.

Well, it was Sadie, and about the most important thing he learned from Sadie was that women have a habit men can seldom stand—a determination to make the best of things. She left him after a year because of his perfectionism.

There was May. There was Janet. There was Peggy, and she was much better. Nonetheless, it didn't last. Well, it was probably intolerable living with someone whose business was figuring out better ways of doing things ; even if, during the time spent figuring out the better way, you could have done it twice over.

He shrugged. He had drunk rather a lot of wine with his lunch, because neither Letta nor Angelus had more than sipped at their glasses. And now he had had a double brandy to settle his nerves after the dismay of what he had done to Angelus . . .

But damn it ! That building of theirs—whatever specious excuse Angelus might trot out, it wasn't simply meant as a way to unsettle people. It would have that effect, but that was incidental. The purpose behind it was . . .

He moved his glass through the well-remembered series of motions he had followed when he was imagining himself inside that building. To him, the directions were as clear as signposts. But he could not complete the series. At the last instant his mind rebelled. Because this direction—the way implied by everything around him—was not a direction at all.

Well, yes—it was. *And* it wasn't. It shared this of the characteristics of an ordinary direction : it meant that if you went that way you'd get somewhere. But it lacked this characteristic of a normal direction : that you would know where you were going.

How was that *possible* ?

He tried to make it clear to himself as he would have done to a stranger. There are always clues to direction in any environment : names on the walls of houses at street-corners, moss on the north side of trees in a wood, the fact that the parallels

of a railway line converge towards the distance. Something very important in his line was to make sure that a new environment was not confusing ; that the new occupant of a house was never disturbed by its layout unnecessarily, that the new employee in a factory was able to go from entry to machine to canteen to toilet to machine to exit as smoothly as might be.

Hence : provide clues to direction. Build in lines that suggest a way to follow. Focus the attention on the best course.

This had sprung from time-and-motion study originally. Now it was part of design in every field—ergonomics, human engineering. He called himself a visualiser, because he worked in collaboration with architects. But he was a human engineer. His job essentially was putting himself in other people's places.

What place was that which the indicated direction (he could not think more clearly of it) led to ?

He closed his eyes. Once more, with maximum concentration, he thought the movements through. And snapped his eyes open again, shaking all over.

"I want to meet the guy who designed that layout," he said to himself under his breath. "Because his mind doesn't work the way mine does !"

It was simple enough, naturally. That was a way you could follow by walking—not a difficult way, requiring artificial aids. Provided you had the right clues to go by, you might chance across it at any time. Neither forward nor back, neither up nor down, neither left nor right. Just another direction leading to . . . ?

If somebody were to wander about that building when it was completed, in an absent-minded state, heeding the random advice of his subconscious, he would very probably walk all the way.

And vanish ?

Joel stopped there. He could not imagine where the new direction led to, and wasn't going to kid himself he could. But he did know that the architect of that extraordinary building was aware of what he was doing. That must be why Angelus and Letta refused categorically to allow a detail to be altered. That was the purpose he had sensed from the model.

Like a trap ? Like a baited trap ?

Confused, he got up from his stool and paid for his drink. "Is there a phone I can use ?" he demanded of the bartender.

There was. He waited for the called number to answer, and when it did said, "Mr. Hamilden's secretary, please."

Click. A soft voice. Joel said, "Tracy?"

"Yes—who is that?"

"Joel Sackstone here."

"Just a second, Mr. Sackstone. Mr. Hamilden is engaged with a client at the moment, I'm afraid—"

"Tracy what?" Joel broke in, scarcely hearing.

There was an interval of puzzled silence. Then—"I'm sorry, Mr. Sackstone? I didn't catch what you said."

"I said Tracy *what*? You've been working for Eric how long?"

"Uh—well, two years." Still puzzled.

"Two years. And I don't know your last name."

She was beginning to catch on. There was a giggle. It was quite a nice giggle.

"Tracy Duchin, Mr. Sackstone. Shall I spell it?"

"No thanks—I'm in no state to write letters right now. Duchin. All right, Tracy Duchin, what are you doing this evening?" As an afterthought, he added, "And my first name, which apparently you don't know, is Joel."

*My job is putting myself in other people's places.*

All right: here was a place to put himself in. A place as next-door in quality as the place this impossible new direction led to. A place coexisting with the world he knew well, and different from it at every turn. A place in which Tracy Duchin lived—as distinct from worked—which was so close to him that he could reach out and take her hand, and yet which was so distant he had never before noticed it.

It was a very strange evening to spend. There was the beginning, when she was uncertain why he had paid her attention at all, when she was wondering so loudly he could hear her think whether he had simply been turned down by Letta Bailbrook and thought of her on the rebound.

There was the middle, when she came to recognise that he was temporarily adrift, and decided she liked him well enough not to mind taking advantage of his drifting. During that period they went to a dance.

There was the end, when he delivered her to her home in a street which seemed to have taken a strange direction all of its own and found its way to somewhere in the Caribbean. As he got out of the car, people looked at him questioningly; they saw Tracy with him, and either their faces lit with smiles or they darkened with displeasure. This was a street new to him—new



to Britain as such things commonly went. A street in the new ghetto.

A little unhappily, he opened the passenger door for Tracy and was about to say the conventional things about hoping she had enjoyed the evening, when he saw—recognised—completely failed to understand.

A tall young woman there on the pavement, walking past, who suddenly quickened her step and averted her face: milk-chocolate skin, hair like midnight, but the manner, and the movements, and the reactions, of . . .

Forgetful of everything, he took a giant stride sideways, blocked her path, stared disbelievingly and saw in the fraction of a second before she recovered her composure that he was right.

He said in a shaking voice, "Letta!"

## five

He *knew* he was right. But she had fully adjusted now, had begun to pretend the start of recognition had never happened. She spoke to him with a sudden lazy smile, and her voice was the same, but her accent was perfect and breathed Trinidad sunshine into the night-lit London street.

"The names wrong, big boy—but the rest is right. Mm-hm!" A trilling hum of approval, that, delivered with all the brazenness she could manage as she swept Joel's tall frame with her eyes. Two or three men idling nearby exchanged grins and moved closer to see what developed.

Suddenly helpless, Joel spun on his heel and appealed to Tracy, who stood irresolute beside the car a few paces from him. He said, "Tracy, don't you know her? In spite of the wig and—and the paint?"

Tracy's small brown face set like supercooled water into which an ice-crumble falls. She shook her head.

The woman he was *sure* was Letta gave a chuckle in which a note of triumph was almost—not quite—buried. She said, "My wig don't flip, big boy. Want I prove it?" Eyes laughing, she put her hands to her hair.

There was a long moment of silence. Ending it, Tracy said in a cold voice, "Thanks for everything, Joel." And turned, and walked with a quick clicking of high heels along the pavement towards her door.

Joel felt as though the entire world had followed the impossible direction now. He shook his head, which was spinning giddily, and did the only practical thing which occurred to him—got back into his car. Letta—who-wasn't spread her hands in an exaggerated gesture of not understanding, and the men who had moved up to watch burst out laughing. She joined in.

Joel slept very badly that night. He kept dreaming he was back in the weird model building, following the subtle implied directions and coming again and again to the point at which he woke up shaking, damp with sweat and very frightened.

Between whiles, he kept encountering Letta turned brown with black hair, Angelus turned albino, himself turned dark.

In the morning he went back to Eric's office. Eric was on the phone to a client when he arrived; he had to wait in the outer room with Tracy for a few minutes, and at first walked about uncertainly while she, apparently quite composed, attended to the sorting of Eric's mail. There had been two minutes of uneasy tension before he halted his pacing abruptly and planted his big hands on the edge of the desk before her.

"Tracy!" he said. "Do you think I went crazy or something last night?"

Dark, quizzical eyes met his. She shrugged.

"Well, I didn't!" Joel asserted hotly. "That girl we ran into—that was Letta Bailbrook, I swear it! Voice, manner, expression—everything except her colour."

"It doesn't sound possible to me," Tracy said shortly.

"Didn't you see the likeness at all?" Joel persisted.

"A likeness, yes," Tracy conceded. "But darn it, Joel—there are just so many ways you can put a person together, and you always run into people who look like other people, don't you?"

It sounded very reasonable, put like that, and for a moment Joel's certainty wavered. Before he could go on, there was a click from the intercom on Tracy's desk, and Eric was heard asking for his mail.

"Mr. Sackstone would like a word with you," Tracy murmured.

"Oh, send him in!" Eric exclaimed grimly. "I want a word with him, too."

Joel had never seen him looking quite so stern as he was this morning, though his voice was neutral as he said good morning and waved at a chair. Accordingly Joel decided he had better make his point first.

Leaning forward, he fixed Eric with his eyes. "Eric, you may not have realised this yet—but there's something peculiar about this Foundation set-up."

"Not realised!" snapped Eric. "To me the whole affair's crazy."

"You feel badly about my taking their side against you yesterday. Fair enough. But listen to this."

And he recounted his sensations as he studied the model, and his encounter with Letta Bailbrook last night.

The second part of his story had no effect on Eric at all; he only shrugged.

"It wouldn't surprise me," he said. "When I inquired about the nature of their work, they mentioned that the colour problem was part of it, and that sometimes they set up identical situations in which that was the only difference. And they said that sometimes they disguise a person and compare the reactions they get—"

"Well, I'll be damned," said Joel softly. "Now why didn't I think of that? That *would* account for it. A kind of field trial of people's attitudes. All right, forget that side of it. But their building, Eric! How about that?"

Eric was having some trouble controlling himself. In an edgy voice, he said, "Joel, I recognise your gift. Nobody appreciates it more than I do. But don't you think that because of your talents you may look for more than is actually there?"

Patently, Joel shook his head. "Eric, I've worked with you closely enough for you to understand me better than that. Put yourself in mind of all the dwelling units we've redesigned in order to make them imply their layout better, just as an example. You're a master hand yourself at focussing the lines of a room or a hall, aren't you—bringing the occupant's attention where it ought to be?"

Eric gave a reluctant nod.

"Well, this building of Angelus's isn't any ordinary building. There are virtually no distractions anywhere. The entire

layout is made to—to converge on a particular direction. But it isn't a direction you can follow !

Sceptically, Eric brushed at his moustache, and Joel knew he had failed to convince him.

"Joel, I don't get you. There are just *so* many possible directions. Who do you think the designer was—Einstein ?"

"No !"

"Then he must be a lunatic, and the whole bunch are probably lunatics. A nonexistent direction, an impossible dimension—rubbish ! Joel, I warn you, if you go on about this you're going to shake my confidence in you and I'll cancel the agreement I made with Angelus yesterday. I don't like it today any better than I did then."

Joel got to his feet with a disgusted expression. He said, "All right. Wait till the damned thing's actually built, and—I'll take you through it and *show* you."

"By then you'll have got over your excitement," Eric muttered, and bent his head to look at something on his desk.

Fuming, Joel went back to Tracy's office and paused in front of her desk. "Tracy, have you the address of this Foundation for—?"

"Study of Social Trends ? Sure, just a second." She turned up a pad beside her phone, copied the address on to a scrap of paper, and handed it to him. "Are you going to go and see them ?"

"This very minute," Joel confirmed.

Seeming not quite sure how to phrase her next sentence, Tracy hesitated. At length she said, "Joel, if maybe they are doing what they seem to be—"

"Yes ?"

"Well—I sort of like the idea. I mean, I've got reasons to like it. Follow me ? Would you let me know what you find out about them ?"

Joel shrugged. "By all means," he said. "But I don't know what there's going to be to find out, more than what I've already been told."

That proved to be a pretty accurate judgment. The Foundation for Study of Social Trends occupied a block of offices on the ground floor of what had formerly been a wealthy family's home in Belgravia. Joel subconsciously expected there to be something extraordinary about the premises, in line with the building they proposed to have erected. Instead, he was faced with a rather dull-looking middle-aged female

secretary, who informed him that neither Mr. Angelus nor Miss Bailbrook was available, but if he wished he could speak to Mr. Harty.

Joel did wish. An hour later, he felt he would have done better not to. For Mr. Harty—an elderly stick of a man with a rasping voice—had nothing extraordinary about him either, except a remarkable capacity for repeating himself. He was simply an administrator, probably a very good one, but at heart a book-keeper cum office manager.

Despite his pride in the way he handled his work, Joel got the distinct impression that Mr. Harty was in some way puzzled by the Foundation's activities. But he could not pin the idea down, and when he eventually left he was more confused than on arrival.

Point : the Foundation existed and operated exactly as Angelus and Letta had claimed.

Point : the organisation was a wealthy one, and plainly it was highly regarded by many distinguished people. Among the research projects of which Mr. Harty had given him details he had noticed some being conducted by famous psychologists and sociologists.

Point : their aims were admirable. To cure the sickness of society, whether manifested as intolerance, or violence, or fanaticism.

Point : other people had set out to tackle these same problems and got precisely nowhere—perhaps because they paid too little attention to the real way in which people's minds work, and too much to their own preconceptions. The Foundation was apparently determined not to make this mistake. The emphasis they placed on control experiments convinced Joel of this.

Had it not been for the far deeper conviction his experience in studying their model building had impressed on him, he would have been content to admire and wish the Foundation well. As it was . . .

In accordance with his promise, he called Tracy when he was through at the Foundation's office, and when she finished work he took her to dinner and told her as much as he could. As an afterthought, he included the strange affair of the impossible direction, wondering whether she would disbelieve him as completely as Eric had done earlier.

Well, she was tempted to, he could see. But she tried not to show it. Frowning, staring down at the table, she made a gallant effort to see some sense in his words.

"I understand what you mean about the layout of a place suggesting directions," she said hesitantly. "You made that very clear. But . . . well, if a staircase naturally leads towards a blank wall, isn't that simple carelessness?"

"If it happened once in the building, it would be. But it goes on and on happening, and always points the same way."

"Even so . . . I don't *see* how there could be a direction between directions, that isn't the same ordinary normal kind of direction as any other."

"Nor did I!" Joel agreed helplessly—and an idea hit him. He dropped his big hands to the table beside his plate.

"Tracy! Will you act as a witness for me?"

"Ah—and do what?"

"Look, I remember as clearly as though I were still in the middle of it exactly how that layout works. I'm beginning to sound crazy to myself. So—in spite of the fact that the idea gives me the screaming meemies—I want to see if I can rig up a kind of analogue of the original, and follow it all the way through."

"What happens then?" Tracy said sceptically. "You saw me in half, maybe?"

Joel closed his eyes, re-visualising the model building. This time he almost managed to figure out what would happen; it was as though he was getting used to the possibility. He spread his hands.

"Probably nothing will happen," he said sourly. "Probably I've just slipped a gear somewhere."

"This Foundation sounds like it's thinking in all gears," Tracy said with unexpected decision. "Okay, Joel, I'll buy it."

## s i x

It didn't have to be exact—only close enough to prompt his memory and jar him into reacting from subconscious impulse rather than conscious intention. So it could be done with the miscellaneous objects available in his largest room. He liked plenty of space, especially free floor area, because that increased the number of direct routes he could take from one point to another.

Tracy sat in a big sling-back armchair shoved back against the wall, her expression mildly puzzled as she watched him arrange odds and ends—sofa cushions, stacks of old newspapers, cans from the kitchen—to represent changes of floor level. He kept walking back to the door and following the kind of maze-like path he had created, shaking his head and making a scarcely noticeable alteration. As he worked, he talked.

"I'm coming to see one way in which it could be done," he said. "Look at it like this. Normally we move in three dimensions—six directions—and exist in a fourth as well."

"I read about it once," Tracy said. "Time."

"Correct. Only if you come to think of it more closely, primitive man—we'll neglect time for the moment—primitive man like a good many other animals really only exists in two dimensions: forward-back, left-right. He extends in the third, up-down, but to move in it he has to have some kind of assistance to be successful. He can jump up, but he can't stay up owing to gravity. He has to climb a tree, or a mountain, to move successfully in the third dimension. Follow me?"

"I think so."

"Okay. But man is a special case. I mean he can look at a tree and think, 'If I climb that tree I shall be high up.' How about some much simpler creature—a snail, for example? A snail can crawl across the ground, or up a wall, or up a tree. But as far as the snail's concerned, the essential difference is that it's hard going straight up. Being higher or lower doesn't signify."

"Ah—yes, all right. Are you coming to the point?"

"Any moment now." Joel made a final adjustment in one of his piles of cans, placed a foot on top and found that it would comfortably take his weight. "Suppose there's a direction we don't know about for the same reason the snail doesn't know about up and down—that we haven't got organs of perception adequate to let us select a path along it. But a genuine physical direction nonetheless. By mere chance, like a snail climbing a wall, we may stumble across it without knowing."

"You're beginning to confuse me," Tracy objected.

"I'm talking to keep my spirits up," confessed Joel. "Not really to explain. Because I'm honestly afraid I may be right."

Nervously Tracy sat forward on her chair. "What exactly is going to happen?" she asked.

"I don't know." Joel cast a final glance at his handiwork, nodded approval of the weird arrangement he had created, and dusted his hands together loudly. "As far as I can see, if I begin at the door I shall end up by walking straight into that wall." He pointed to his left. "I planned it this way to drive the lesson home if I'm mistaken; I'll bang my head hard enough to knock sense into it. Well, I might as well start now, I suppose. Watch carefully."

He went to the door, turned around, and revealed to Tracy that in turning he had closed his eyes. Yet he did not come hesitantly forward again; he walked as though he were actually seeing what he was presenting to himself in imagination—the interior of the Foundation building, which was so far only a model, but was already an enigma.

He moved with absolute precision. When he took a step up or down, there was something to give his feet purchase. He had planned to a fraction of an inch. He did not hesitate at all during the time—about half a minute—it took him to navigate along the imaginary path and reach its end.

Watching him, Tracy firmly repressed the desire to cry out and warn him he was about to walk into a wall. He knew; he had said he knew. And he gave the impression of utter competence in this his specialist task.

Not checking his pace, Joel reached the wall, took a long final stride, and went through.

Tracy did cry out then, though not very loudly. Partly that was because she was half-prepared for something of the sort; partly because she could not rid herself of the sneaking suspicion some kind of trickery was involved. She couldn't think of a reason for Joel tricking anyone, but it wasn't impossible.

She got to her feet and walked to where he had vanished. It was not until she had crossed the room that she found she had the knuckles of the first two fingers of her right hand clenched between her teeth to stop herself crying out again; when she looked, she found the teeth had left deep indentations in the flesh.

Beginning to shake a little, she went to the telephone at the far side of the room and picked up the receiver. She made two mistakes when she tried to dial, which was silly because she had called this number enough times in the past couple of months—for Eric—to know it perfectly. She was dreadfully afraid that



no one would answer. The relief when a reply did come was so overwhelming she took twice as long as necessary to make clear the one essential point.

"I've got to get hold of Mr. Angelus or Miss Bailbrook—right now, this very moment!"

One pace past the point at which he was prepared to bang his head against the wall, Joel stopped walking so abruptly he rocked on his feet. His eyes snapped open like camera shutters, and impossibility made real blasted into his awareness.

Blue sky—a good, plain, ordinary summer sky, with an ordinary yellow sun in it. Good. Grass, the correct green, and in the distance some trees which looked like ordinary trees. Good.

But underfoot! Some firm elastic pinkish material extending like a pathway ahead of him, towards buildings of golden colour and unpredictable shape—cycloidal domes, pyramids, cylinders offset on one another. Beyond the buildings, towering twice their height towards the blue sky, were objects like tremendous eggs so black the eye could barely endure to look at them because they seemed to suck the light from the world.

As he stared in that first incredulous moment, one of the eggs vanished with a clap like thunder; its place remained vacant for perhaps seconds, and was filled again.

There was movement. There were people in front of the strange buildings—perhaps a hundred yards from where he stood—who caught sight of him and begun to hurry in his direction, calling out to him. At first Joel could not distinguish any details of their appearance; then he saw that there were both men and women among them, and that they wore something more like harness than clothing. What at first glance he took for close-fitting tan garments proved to be their own skins.

He glanced about him, not yet thinking coherently, his mind full of visions of flight. But there was nowhere to flee to; behind him, the pinkish pathway led to another cluster of buildings, another group of night-black eggs in cradles of white girders, and another group of people—fewer, but also hurrying towards him.

It was not until they had come very close indeed to where he stood rooted by terror to one spot that he saw among them a—  
a creature.

This was a being nearly as tall as a man, but having nothing in common otherwise : running on short limbs from which a pale grey trunk tilted forward as a skier tilts his body when running fast down hill, swinging a group of more limbs—five or six—that sprouted from that trunk as counterweights to save itself from toppling over when it came to a halt.

It was mainly because he was so fascinated at the sight of this unprecedented creature that he did not yield to his instinct and flee blindly. One moment after he found himself surrounded by the harnessed, brown-skinned strangers he was again in the grip of mindless fear.

Only slowly did he manage to convince himself there was nothing aggressive in their manner, or in the tone of voice with which they put startled questions to him. He could make nothing of what was said to begin with, though he fancied he caught a hint of meaning here and there. At last he licked his lips and heard his own trembling voice say, "I don't understand you."

Instantly a man in the front rank of the group slapped his forehead. "Ancient English!" he said clearly. "You're speaking Ancient English. Why didn't I guess from your clothes? How did you get here? What happened?"

"Ancient English?" echoed Joel. The sun was warm and welcoming, but he felt a wave of icy horror sweep across his mind. "Ancient—English?"

With a strange pitying expression the man nodded. "You are probably from the twentieth century of the Christian era, aren't you? Well, by that reckoning, you're now—four and a half centuries ahead of your own time."

The pale grey trunk on legs turned to the man speaking, and addressed a question to him. With incredulous amazement, Joel felt a pattern drop into place in his mind. He said, "You—this—"

There was instantly a tension in the air. The group about him seemed to stiffen, prepared for some unseen disaster. The pattern Joel had worked out fitted that, too. He swallowed with a tremendous effort, and said clearly, "Would you—uh—introduce me to the—uh—gentleman from—uh—another planet? I never had the opportunity of . . ."

He broke off. They were laughing all round him. For a moment he thought that his guesswork was all wrong, and that they were amused at his absurd mistake. Then he realised it

was the laughter of relief, and was suddenly weak and unsteady on his legs.

"Hey!" the spokesman said warningly, and put out his arm, supporting Joel. "Well, friend, I don't know how you got into this act, but—you seem to know a surprising amount about it. How come? I mean, I wouldn't even be surprised if you said you knew you were going to turn up in your future this way."

Painfully, but immensely proud of the fact that he wasn't hysterical from shock, or worse, Joel forced a grin. He said, "Well as a matter of fact I rather think I did."

The spokesman's face revealed him deciding not to waste more time on being puzzled. He shrugged. "Obviously, we've got some explanations to attend to. Ah—you asked to be introduced to our friend . . . Well, that's not so easy, because he's not exactly a gentleman or anything else; he's a colony of mutually interdependent cells somewhat like a jellyfish but very highly evolved, and he hasn't a name, and there are certain human-based concepts he can't understand of which personal singular identity is one. So if you don't mind I'll leave it at that . . .?"

"Well—uh—of course," said Joel, and was still unable to take his eyes from the greyish trunk of the creature. With a further shock he saw that what he had taken for its tegument was actually protective clothing of some sort, and there were artifacts—filters, perhaps—dotted up the front of the trunk like buttons.

"I don't quite know what we're going to do about you," the spokesman was saying thoughtfully. "But, at any rate, let's get over to the control building and talk in comfort. I must say that for a—forgive me, but you are, you know!—a virtual primitive, you're taking this extremely well."

Joel was going to say something about his actual state of mind, behind his automatic sleepy calm. But he was interrupted.

From behind him—from a mere yard or two distant—three voices suddenly cried out. Two of them said, "Sackstone!" The third said, "Joel!"

He whirled, and all the harnessed men and women with him. There on the pinkish path a few paces distant, starting forward, were Angelus, and Letta Bailbrook, and Tracy.

## seven

"My friend Chamberel here," said Angelus in his suave manner, "tells me that you seem to have worked out for yourself an astonishingly accurate idea of what's happened to you." He waved in the direction of the man who had been spokesman for the group that met Joel on arrival. "So perhaps you'd like to tell us what you think . . .?"

Joel cupped between his big hands the cool container he had been given a few moments before, which held a sparkling reddish liquid, tart like fresh red-currant juice but with a strong rich scent like wine. A lot of things hadn't changed; the cup was essentially a cup; this chair he sat in was recognisably evolved from a chair of the mid-twentieth century, and the room had walls and a door and windows and tables.

He said, "Is there something in this drink you gave us?"

Angelus nodded. "What you would call a tranquilising drug. Although you support your experience very well, there is necessarily a psychical traumatic effect which it's best to counteract at once. You don't object?"

"No, of course not. I just thought I was overdue for some delayed shock-reaction, and I couldn't feel any." Joel glanced at Tracy, and found she was staring at him with narrowed eyes as though preferring to fix her attention on something familiar. Her knuckles were pale around her own cup of drink.

Speaking in as reassuring a tone as he could manage, for Tracy's benefit, Joel said, "The way I figure it is this. We human beings exist in four dimensions and we have knowledge of direction in six of the eight possible ways. Or seven, if you like. Because we travel all the time forward into time. The big difference is simply that we're able to reverse our journeys in the ordinary dimensions; we can go and come back, we can jump up and drop down again. Having gone left, we can then go right, and so on.

"I was working it out for Tracy in terms of a snail, which is three-dimensional all right, as much as a man is, but which can really only perceive and work in terms of the directions proper to two dimensions. A snail, going up a wall, is just going along as usual, not consciously going *up*.

"Maybe—I thought—there's a way of using the directions proper to a fourth dimension, which people sometimes stumble across. Which they can be impelled, or urged, towards. The

way the layout of your weird building will impel people." He looked direct at Angelus.

But it was Letta who commented. "Marco!" she said. "Did I not say we ought to pay attention to this unique individual?"

"Unique hell!" said Joel. "I think a lot of people have disappeared by accidentally walking in—in a temporal direction. Absent-mindedly, perhaps."

"That is very probably correct," Angelus nodded. "Though we have no definite record of any such case. You see—oh, I would have to demonstrate this either mathematically or in the language of my own time which has evolved to cope with the concepts; English never did, I'm afraid. Human has supplanted most other languages gradually over the past hundred and fifty years, you see.

"But very broadly, you're right in your surmise. Only the direction you yourself have now followed is not identical with the time-dimension; if it were, in going to the past I would become my original component atoms, of course, not preserve continuity as a thinking individual. It is perhaps closer to compare it to—well, say that a savage who cannot swim comes to a deep, wide river. He has to go around its headwaters to reach the other side. But with his own unaided muscles, and some grasp of the concept involved, he could swim across. I can't bring it any nearer to you, I'm afraid."

"But Mr. Sackstone has an excellent grasp of the principle," Letta put in. "The—what was your expressive phrase?—the jury-rigged arrangement in his room, which we ourselves used to come after him, was an amazing first attempt."

Joel felt ridiculously proud of himself, and a bit embarrassed.

He said, "Uh—but all the paradoxes they talk about . . .?"

"Such as causing a building to be erected in our own past? Such as interfering with the lives of our ancestors?" Angelus smiled. "I'm afraid you'll have to take it for granted that there are no paradoxes. Remember what I said—the direction involved is not identical with the time-dimension. It simply intersects with it."

"I give up," Joel said after a moment's struggle.

"I'm afraid so. Actually, though we've known of this direction for a century or two, only very exceptional persons like yourself, with astonishing powers of spatial visualisation, can follow it without complex artificial aids like the ones built

into our proposed headquarters in your own century. I imagine you might after training do it unaided ; if you care to find out, we'll be overjoyed to give you facilities, because that's one of our chief problems at the moment."

Tracy broke in unexpectedly. Leaning forward, she said, "I want to know—Joel, ask them what it's all for, please !"

Composedly, Letta crossed her legs. "I believe Joel will make a successful guess at that, too. Go ahead, Joel."

Joel closed his eyes, re-visualising the vast black eggs in their girder-cradles outside, re-visualising the strange pale grey trunk of the creature from some other world. He said, "Ah—all right. Is it a kind of psycho-analysis ?"

Angelus's normal composure broke to pieces with a strangled grunt of surprise. He said something in his own tongue to Letta, who burst out laughing, before addressing Joel again.

"This is more than I bargained for, Mr. Sackstone ! Because you're so *exactly* right I just accused Letta of speaking too freely to you ! I haven't any idea what we're going to do with you, but we're not going to let you slip lightly, so if you want to listen I'll tell you just how right you are."

"Please go ahead !" said Joel, alarming excitement rising inside him.

"In strictly psychological terms, then, we're trying to get rid of a guilt-complex," Angelus began.

This planet Earth was not the only one to bear intelligent life. It had turned out so far, though, to be the one where the dominant species had taken the most violent and bloody path towards eventual civilisation.

Those men who first ventured into space came from a society sick with fear and suspicion—fear of annihilation in an ultimate war, suspicion that the motives of others were as selfish at bottom as their own.

The first manned probes to distant planets drew the attention of other races who had long ago entered the starways, who came cautiously but with welcoming intent to greet the toddling infant Man as he moved into the adult universe.

And Man—fearful, suspicious—feared, suspected, and attacked.

It had taken the better part of two hundred years for those fears and suspicions to die down, and even now the consequences of what had been done hastily, from panic, had not been atoned for.

"That's a long time for a conscience to take to evolve," Angelus said greyly. "But it came. It came, in the end. And you can guess the result. One of the saving graces of our sometimes repulsive race is that we are capable of feeling ashamed.

"Only shame is just as much a handicap to a rational person as fear, hatred and suspicion. So what was to be done? Only one thing. We had to fetch up into the light of day the unpleasant impulses which now made us ashamed. We had to lay bare for analysis and eventual understanding the forces which prevented us from believing in other races' good intentions. We had to carry out—as you almost said—a socio-analysis of human history. We had to come to understand, through personal contact with people in every epoch of history, the forces at work in their minds."

"And by experiencing them for yourselves?" Joel suggested.

Angelus caught his meaning instantly. He inclined his head with a faint smile. "Yes . . . Letta told me she was not sure she had convinced you you were mistaken when you ran into her in her—ah—alternate guise. I may say that by recognising her you upset a good many of our preconceptions about the role of pigmentation in twentieth-century society. And add incidentally that you might also occasionally have encountered myself looking more blonde than usual."

"Wasn't that pretty risky?" Tracy said.

Angelus shrugged. "The risks in that are fairly predictable. Others aren't. We went to a restaurant yesterday; we're not intimately acquainted with twentieth-century cuisine, and as it happens some minor genetic shift has left me, and a good many people of my generation, unable to endure the enzymes which turn milk to cheese. Consequently I ordered something by mistake which turned out to be dressed with cheese, and the result was calamitous."

Joel made to apologise, but Angelus shook his head, smiling.

"I said to you the other day," put in Letta quietly, "that we were afraid we might be wasting our time. You see, when we first looked into the particular aspect of the situation which has been assigned to us—your own period—we had a horrible sense that disaster was ultimately unstoppable. On every side we found people of goodwill, with high, civilised ideals—and yet a pattern of nastiness which had occurred a thousand times over elsewhere was steadily evolving as though no one raised any objection to it.

"But that was just a momentary aberration, of course. It springs from the sense of shame Marco was referring to. We so much want to emerge into the community of civilised races, but we fully understand that the prerequisite is to know our own worst shortcomings and to guard against them so efficiently that they will never again cause calamity."

Joel gave a thoughtful nod. It all made sense, barring one thing. He said, "But the—the creature I met on my arrival: how about him? What's he doing here if we aren't open to contact with these other races?"

Angelus and Letta exchanged glances. Letta said after a while, "Well . . . That's a brave person, you see, Joel. He's exactly as brave as a missionary in your own time who chose to live among a tribe of headhunters."

"What in heaven's name did we *do*, then?" Joel demanded.

"I'm not going to tell you!" said Angelus violently. "If you make up your mind that you would rather disappear from your own period and allow us to work on your—talents, you'll be told sooner or later. But I'm not going to burden you with details of the things we're ashamed of."

Joel was silent for a long time. After a while, he grew aware that Tracy was still looking at him. He thought about some corollaries of that.

And finally he said, "Well, it scares me stiff. But as I told you before, I like your ideas. Having got in your way like this I wouldn't feel right about doing anything else."

It was a hell of a big decision to take on such short notice. But he knew it would last.

"I like your ideas too," said Tracy determinedly. "Do I get a chance to come in on this?"

Angelus glanced at her, and was going to shape a doubtful answer, when Letta put her hand on his arm.

"Everybody's in on this," she said crisply. "Whether they like it or not, from—from Adam and Eve through to us here. And nobody can set us straight but ourselves."

She turned to Tracy and Joel. "Don't delude yourselves it's easy. It isn't in the least. You'll certainly be tempted to change your minds, and you won't be able to. Think it over for a while, and give us an answer then."

"I know already," said Joel, and with mild astonishment realised that Tracy had spoken at the same instant in the same Words.

—John Brunner



*This is probably the strangest story Mr. Ballard has yet written although the basic plot has been used before by other authors. However, none of them, to our knowledge, approached it from this particular angle.*

# MR. F IS MR. F

BY J. G. BALLARD

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And baby makes three.

. . . 11 o'clock. *Hanson should have reached here by now. Where on Earth is—Elizabeth ! Damn, why does she always move so quietly ?*

Climbing down from the window overlooking the road, Freeman ran back to his bed and jumped in, smoothing the blankets over his knees. As his wife poked her head around the door he smiled up at her guilelessly, pretending to read a magazine.

"Everything all right, dear?" she asked, eyeing him shrewdly. She moved her broad matronly bulk towards him and automatically began to straighten the bed. Freeman fidgetted irritably, pushing her away when she tried to lift him off the pillow on which he was sitting.

"For heaven's sake, Elizabeth, I'm not a child !" he remonstrated, controlling his sing-song voice with difficulty. "Don't worry about me all the time ! What's happened to Hanson ? He was supposed to be here half an hour ago."

His wife shook her large handsome head and went over to the window. The loose cotton dress disguised her figure, but

as she reached up to the bolt Freeman thought he could see the incipient swell of her pregnancy.

"He must have missed his train," she suggested vaguely. With a single twist of her forearm she securely fastened the upper bolt, which had taken Freeman ten minutes to unlatch.

"I thought I could hear it banging," she said pointedly to her husband. "We don't want you to catch a cold, do we?"

Freeman waited impatiently for her to leave, glancing at his watch. When his wife paused at the foot of the bed, surveying him carefully, he could barely restrain himself from shouting at her.

"I'm getting the baby's clothes together," she said, adding aloud to herself, "which reminds me, you need a new dressing gown. That old one of your's is losing its shape."

Freeman pulled the lapels of the dressing gown across each other, as much to hide his bare chest as to fill out the gown.

"Elizabeth, I've had this for years and it's perfectly good. You're getting an obsession about renewing everything." He hesitated, realising the tactlessness of this remark—women always worked like beavers during their pregnancies, cleaning and replacing every seam and stitch, and he should be flattered that she was identifying him with the expected baby. If the strength of the identification was sometimes alarming, this was probably because she was having her first child at a comparatively late age, in her early forties. Besides, he had been ill and bed-ridden during the past month (and what were *his* unconscious motives?) which only served to reinforce the confusion.

"Elizabeth, I'm sorry. It's been good of you to look after me when you've so much to do, I hope I haven't been a nuisance. Perhaps we should call a doctor."

*No!* something screamed inside him.

As if hearing this, his wife shook her head in agreement.

"You'll be all right soon, dear. Let nature take its proper course. I don't think you need to see the doctor yet."

*Yet?*

She gave him a warm smile and went to the door, leaving it slightly ajar behind her.

Freeman listened to her feet disappearing softly down the carpeted staircase. A few minutes later the sound of the washing machine drummed out from the kitchen.

*Yet!*

Freeman slipped quickly out of bed and went into the bathroom.

The tall airing cupboard beside the wash-basin was crammed with drying baby clothes, which Elizabeth had either bought or knitted, then carefully washed and sterilised. On each of the five shelves a large square of gauze covered the neat piles, but he could see that most of the clothes were blue, a few white and none pink.

*Hope Elizabeth is right, he thought. If she is it's certainly going to be the world's best-dressed baby. We're supporting an industry single-handed.*

He bent down to the bottom compartment, from below the tank pulled out a small set of scales. On the shelf immediately above he noticed a large brown garment, a six-year-old's one-piece romper suit. Next to it was a set of vests, out-size, almost big enough to fit Freeman himself.

"Good God," he said aloud. "She's really planning ahead."

Smiling to himself, he stripped off his dressing gown and pyjamas and stepped onto the platform. In the mirror behind the door he examined his small hairless body, with its thin shoulders and narrow hips, long coltish legs.

*93 pounds yesterday.* Averting his eyes from the dial, he listened to the washing machine below, then waited for the pointer to steady.

"86!"

Fumbling with his dressing gown, Freeman pushed the scales under the tank, closed the door quickly.

*86 pounds! A drop of seven pounds in 24 hours!*

He hurried back into bed, and sat there trembling nervously, fingering for his vanished moustache.

Yet only two months ago he had weighed over 160 pounds! Seven pounds in a single day, at this rate—

His mind baulked at the conclusion. Trying to steady his knees, he reached for one of the magazines, turned the pages blindly.

And baby makes two.

He had first become aware of the transformation six weeks earlier, almost immediately after Elizabeth's pregnancy had been confirmed.

Shaving the next morning in the bathroom before going to the office, he discovered that his moustache was thinning. The usually stiff black bristles were soft and flexible, taking on their former ruddy-brown colouring.

His beard, too, was lighter ; normally dark and heavy after only a few hours, it yielded before the first few strokes of the razor, leaving his face pink and soft.

Freeman had credited this apparent rejuvenation to the appearance of the baby. He was forty when he married Elizabeth, two or three years her junior, and had assumed unconsciously that he was too old to become a parent, particularly as he had deliberately selected Elizabeth as an ideal mother-substitute, and saw himself as her child rather than as her parental partner. However, now that a child had actually materialised he felt no resentment towards it. Complimenting himself, he decided that he had entered a new phase of psychic maturity and could whole-heartedly throw himself into the role of young parent.

Hence the disappearing moustache, the fading beard, the youthful spring in his step.

"*Just Lizzie and me,*" he crooned,

"*And baby makes three.*"

Behind him, in the mirror, he watched Elizabeth still asleep, her large hips filling the bed. He was glad to see her rest. Contrary to what he had expected, she was even more concerned with him than with the baby, refusing to allow him to prepare his own breakfast when he volunteered to. As he brushed his hair, a rich blonde growth, sweeping back off his forehead to cover his bald dome, he reflected wryly on the time-honoured saws in the maternity books about the hypersensitivity of expectant fathers—evidently Elizabeth took these counsels seriously.

He tip-toed back into the bedroom, switching off the alarm clock (it had been set to 7-45 but he had woken half an hour earlier), and stood by the open window, basking in the crisp early morning air. Downstairs, while he waited for breakfast, he pulled his old tennis racquet out of the hall cupboard, finally woke Elizabeth when one of his practice strokes cracked the glass in the barometer.

"Elizabeth, I'm terribly sorry," he began to apologise as she came down the stairs, but she smiled indulgently and patted him on the shoulder.

"That's all right, dear, it's good to see you so full of beans. Why don't you go out into the garden and play? There's more room for you there."

Freeman had done so, clouted one of the tennis balls over the roof of a house one hundred yards away.

To begin with Freeman had revelled in his new-found sources of energy. He joined the office tennis tournament, took Elizabeth boating, rowing her furiously up and down the river, rediscovering all the physical pleasures he had been too pre-occupied to enjoy in his early twenties. He would go shopping with Elizabeth, steering her smoothly along the pavement, carrying all her baby purchases, shoulders back, feeling ten feet tall.

However, it was here that he had his first sensation of alarm, an inkling of what was really happening.

Elizabeth was a large woman, attractive in her way, with broad shoulders and strong hips, one of those tall women accustomed to wearing high heels. Freeman, a stocky man of medium height, had always been slightly shorter than her, but this had never worried him.

When he found that he barely reached above her shoulder he began to examine himself more closely.

On one of their shopping expeditions (Elizabeth always took Freeman with her, unselfishly asked his opinions, what he preferred, almost as if *he* would be wearing the tiny matinee coats and dresses) a saleswoman unwittingly referred to Elizabeth as his "mother." Jolted, Freeman had suddenly recognised the obvious disparity between them—the pregnancy was making Elizabeth's face puffy, filling out her neck and shoulders, while his own features were smooth and unlined.

When they reached home he wandered around the lounge and dining room, realised that the furniture and book-shelves seemed larger and more bulky. Upstairs in the bathroom he climbed on the scales for the first time, found that he had lost twenty pounds in weight.

Undressing that night, he made another curious discovery.

Elizabeth was taking up the seams of his jackets and trousers. She had said nothing to him about this, and when he saw her sewing away over her needle basket he had assumed she was preparing something for the baby.

During the next days his first flush of spring vigour faded. Strange changes were taking place in his body—his skin and hair, his entire musculature, seemed transformed. The planes of his face had altered, the jaw was trimmer, the nose less prominent, cheeks smooth and unblemished.

Examining his mouth in the mirror, he found that most of his old metal fillings had vanished, firm white enamel taking their place.

He continued to go to the office, conscious of the stares of his colleagues around him. The day after he found he could no longer reach the reference books on the shelf behind his desk he stayed at home, feigning an attack of influenza.

Elizabeth seemed to understand completely. Freeman had said nothing to her, afraid that she might be terrified into a miscarriage if she learned the truth. Swathed in his old dressing gown, a woollen scarf around his neck and chest to make his slim figure appear more bulky, he sat on the sofa in the lounge, blankets piled across him, a firm cushion raising him higher off the seat.

Carefully he tried to avoid standing whenever Elizabeth was in the room, when absolutely necessary circled behind the furniture on tip-toe.

A week later, however, when his feet no longer touched the floor below the dining-room table, he decided to remain in his bed upstairs.

Elizabeth agreed readily. All the while she watched her husband with her bland impassive eyes, quietly readying herself for the baby.

*Damn Hanson*, Freeman thought. At 11-45 he had still not appeared. Freeman flipped through the magazine without looking at it, glancing irritably at his watch every few seconds. The strap was now too large for his wrist and twice he had prised additional holes for the clasp.

How to describe his metamorphosis to Hanson he had not decided, plagued as he was by curious doubts. He was not even sure what *was* happening. Certainly he had lost a remarkable amount of weight—up to eight or nine pounds each day—and almost a foot in height, but without any accompanying loss of health. He had, in fact, reverted to the age and physique of a 14-year-old school-boy.

But what was the real explanation? Freeman asked himself. Was the rejuvenation some sort of psycho-somatic excess? Although he felt no conscious animosity towards the expected baby, was he in the grip of an insane attempt at retaliation?

It was this possibility, with its logical prospect of padded cells and white-coated guards, that had frightened Freeman into silence. Elizabeth's doctor was brusque and unsympathetic, almost certainly would regard Freeman as a neurotic malingerer, perpetrating an elaborate charade designed to substitute himself for his own child in his wife's affections.

Also, Freeman knew, there were other motives, obscure and intangible, but the most powerful of all. Frightened of examining them, he began to read the magazine.

It was a schoolchild's comic. Annoyed, Freeman stared at the cover, looked at the stack of magazines which Elizabeth had ordered from the newsagent that morning. They were all the same.

His wife entered her bedroom on the other side of the landing. Freeman slept alone now in what would eventually be the baby's nursery, partly to give himself enough privacy to think, and also to save him the embarrassment of revealing his shrinking body to his wife.

She came in, carrying a small tray on which were a glass of warm milk and two biscuits. Although he was losing weight, Freeman had the eager appetite of a child, took the biscuits from her and ate them hurriedly.

Elizabeth sat on the bed, producing a brochure from the pocket of her apron.

"I want to order the baby's cot," she told him. "Would you like to choose one of the designs?"

Freeman waved airily. "Any of them will do. Pick one that's strong and heavy, something he won't be able to climb out of too easily."

His wife nodded, watching him pensively. All afternoon she spent ironing and cleaning, moving the piles of dry linen into the cupboards on the landing, disinfecting pails and buckets.

They had decided she would have the baby at home.

*63 pounds !*

Freeman gaped at the dial below his feet, trying to digest the significance of the reading. During the previous two days he had lost over twenty pounds, had barely been able to reach up to the handle of the airing cupboard and open the door. Trying not to look at himself in the mirror, he realised he was now the size of a six-year-old, with a slim round chest, slender neck and face. The skirt of the dressing gown trailed across the floor behind him, and only with difficulty could he keep his arms through the voluminous sleeves.

When Elizabeth came up with his breakfast she examined him critically, put the tray down and went out to one of the landing cupboards. She returned with a small sports-shirt and pullover, a pair of corduroy shorts.

"Would you like to wear these, dear?" she asked. "You'll find them more comfortable."

Reluctant to use his voice, which had degenerated into a piping treble, Freeman shook his head. After she had gone, however, he pulled off the heavy dressing gown and put on the garments, feeling better for doing so.

Suppressing his inner doubts, he wondered how to reach the doctor without having to go downstairs to the telephone. So far he had managed to avoid raising his wife's suspicions, but now there was no hope of continuing to do so. He barely reached up to her waist, and if she saw him standing upright she might well die of shock on the spot.

Fortunately, Elizabeth left him alone. Once, just after lunch, two men arrived in a van from the department store and delivered a blue cot and play-pen, but he pretended to be asleep and hid behind the bedclothes until they had gone. Despite his anxiety, Freeman easily fell asleep—he had begun to feel unusually tired after lunch—and woke two hours later to find that Elizabeth had made the bed in the cot, swathing the small blue blankets and pillow in a plastic sheet.

Below this, shackled to the wooden sides, he could just see the white leather straps of a restraining harness.

The next morning Freeman decided to escape. His weight was down to only 43 pounds, and the clothes Elizabeth had given him the previous day were already three sizes too large, the trousers supporting themselves precariously around his slender waist. In the bathroom mirror Freeman stared at the small boy watching him with wide startled eyes, and dimly remembered snapshots of his own childhood.

After breakfast, when Elizabeth was out in the garden with her washing, he crept downstairs, through the window saw her open the dustbin, push inside his business suit and black leather shoes.

While she was by the line he picked up the telephone, dialling the number first and then holding the heavy receiver in both hands.

"Dr. Marshall's surgery, good morning," a brisk young woman replied.

"Could I speak to Dr. Marshall?" Freeman piped, trying without success to deepen his voice.

The receptionist hesitated. "Who's that calling, please?"

"Mr. Freeman," he said firmly.



The receptionist chuckled amiably. "Well, Master Freeman if you want to see the doctor I think you'd better ask your mother first, don't you?"

Freeman gripped the receiver tightly, trying not to raise his voice.

"I am Mr. Freeman," he insisted. "It's extremely urgent."

The receptionist sighed, suddenly bored. "Yes, dear," she said, then rang off.

Freeman waited helplessly for a moment, replaced the receiver and hurried back to his room. Striding up the huge steps required more effort than he imagined, and by the time he reached the top flight he was too exhausted to climb on to the bed. Panting, he leaned against it for a few minutes. Even if he reached the hospital, how could he convince anyone there of what had happened without having to call Elizabeth along to identify him?

Fortunately, his intelligence was still intact. Given a pencil and paper he would soon demonstrate his adult mind and sophistication, a circumstantial knowledge of social affairs that no infant prodigy could ever possess.

His first task was to reach the hospital, or failing that, the local police station. Luckily, all he needed to do was walk along the nearest main thoroughfare—a four-year-old child wandering about on his own would soon be picked up by a constable on duty.

Below, he heard Elizabeth come slowly up the stairs, the wicker laundry basket creaking under her arm. Frantically Freeman tried to lift himself on to the bed, but only succeeded in disarranging the sheets. As Elizabeth opened the door he ran around to the far side of the bed and hid his tiny body behind it, resting his chin on the bed-spread.

Elizabeth paused, watching his small plump face. For a moment they gazed at each other, Freeman's heart pounding with terror, wondering how she could fail to realise what had happened to him. But she merely smiled and walked through into the bathroom.

Supporting himself on the bedside table, he climbed in quickly, his face away from the bathroom door. On her way out Elizabeth bent down and tucked him up carefully, then slipped quietly out of the room, latching the door behind her.

The rest of the day Freeman waited for an opportunity to escape from the house, but his wife was busy upstairs, forestalling him.

Early that evening, before he could prevent himself, he fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

He woke in a vast white room, blue light dappling the high walls, along which a line of giant animal figures danced and gambolled. Looking around, he realised that he was still in the nursery, his diminutive body enlarging its dimensions.

He pushed back the huge eiderdown that billowed over him, sat up and began to inspect himself. He was wearing a small pair of polka-dot pyjamas he had seen a few days earlier in the linen cupboard (had Elizabeth changed him while he slept?) but they were almost too large for his shrunken arms and legs.

His watch was on the bedside table, among the comics and magazines. He picked it up and held it in both hands, where it seemed the size of a saucer. 8-45. Soon Elizabeth would come up with his breakfast.

A miniature dressing gown had been laid out across the foot of the bed, a pair of felt slippers on the floor. Freeman climbed down from the bed and put them on, noticing that his balance was strangely unsteady.

The door was closed, but he pulled a chair over and stood on it, turning the handle with his two small fists.

On the landing he paused, listening carefully. Elizabeth was in the kitchen, humming to herself. As usual, after collecting the milk bottles from the back door, she went into the lounge and opened the french windows.

One step at a time, Freeman moved down the staircase, watching his wife through the rail. She was standing over the cooker, her broad back almost hiding the machine, warming up some milk gruel. Freeman waited until she turned to the sink then ran across the hall into the lounge and out through the french windows.

Crouching below the coal bunkers, he made his way along the passage beside the house, the thick soles of his carpet slippers muffling his footsteps, and broke into a run once he reached the shelter of the front garden. The gate was almost too stiff for him to open, and as he fumbled with the latch a middle-aged woman stopped and peered down at him, frowning at the windows.

Freeman managed to smile at her, and pretended to run back into the house, hoping that Elizabeth had not yet discovered his disappearance. When the woman moved off, muttering to herself, he opened the gate, closing it gently

behind him, and hurried down the street towards the shopping centre.

He had entered an enormous world. On either side of him the two-storey houses loomed like canyon walls, the end of the street one hundred yards away apparently below the horizon. The paving stones were massive and uneven, the boughs of the tall sycamores as distant as the sky. A car came towards him, daylight between its wheels, hesitated and sped on. At the far corner an elderly man shuffled slowly, but otherwise the street was deserted.

He was still fifty yards from the corner when he tripped over one of the pavement stones and was forced to stop. Out of breath, he leaned against a tree, his legs exhausted.

Over his shoulder he heard a gate open, saw Elizabeth glance up and down the street. Quickly he stepped behind the tree, waited until she returned to the house, and then set off again for the corner.

Suddenly, sweeping down from the sky, a vast arm picked him up and lifted him off his feet. Gasping with surprise, he looked up into the face of Mr. Symonds, his bank manager, smiling at him with amusement.

"You're out early, young man," Symonds said. He put Freeman down, holding him tightly by one hand. His car was parked in the drive next to them. Leaving the engine running, he began to walk Freeman back down the street.

"Now, let's see, where do you live?" Symonds asked pleasantly. "The big house with red gates?"

Freeman tried to pull himself away, jerking his arm furiously, but Symonds hardly noticed his efforts.

Just then Elizabeth stepped out of the gate, an apron around her waist, and hurried towards them.

Shrinking, Freeman tried to hide between Symond's legs, felt himself picked up in the bank manager's strong arms and handed to Elizabeth. She held him firmly, his head over her broad shoulder, thanked Symonds and carried him back into the house.

As they crossed the pathway Freeman hung limply, trying to will himself out of existence, the prospect of the now inevitable confrontation draining all energy from him.

In the nursery he waited for his feet to touch the bed, ready to dive below the blankets, but instead Elizabeth lowered him

carefully to the floor, and he discovered he had been placed in the baby's play-pen.

He held the rail uncertainly, while Elizabeth bent over and straightened his dressing gown. Then, to Freeman's relief, she turned away. Glancing down at him briefly, her face hidden in the shadows behind the door, she left the room.

For five minutes Freeman stood numbly by the rail, outwardly recovering his breath, but at the same time gradually realising something of which he had been dimly afraid for several days—by an extraordinary inversion of logic, Elizabeth completely identified him with the baby inside her womb! Far from showing surprise at Freeman's incredible transformation into a three-year-old child, his wife merely accepted this as a natural concomittant of her own pregnancy, in her mind she had externalised the child within her. As Freeman shrank progressively smaller, mirroring the growth of her child, her eyes were fixed on their common focus, and all she could see was the image of her baby.

Still searching for a means of escape, Freeman made another annoying discovery. He was unable to climb out of the play-pen! The light wooden bars were too strong for his small arms to break, the whole cage too heavy to lift. Soon exhausting himself, he sat down on the floor, fiddling nervously with a large coloured ball.

Instead of trying to evade Elizabeth and hide his transformation from her, he realised that he must now attract her attention force her to recognise his real identity.

Standing up, he began to rock the play-pen from side to side, edging it across to the wall where the sharp corner set up a steady battering.

Elizabeth came out of her bedroom.

"Now, darling, what's all the noise for?" she asked, smiling at him affectionately. "How about a biscuit?" She knelt down by the pen, her face only a few inches from Freeman's.

Screwing up his courage, Freeman looked straight at her, searching the large, almost unblinking eyes, the rounded width of her cheekbones.

He took the biscuit, cleared his throat and said carefully: "I'd nod blor aby."

Elizabeth grinned and ruffled his long blonde hair. "Aren't you, darling? What a sad shame."

Freeman stamped his foot, then flexed his lips, desperately trying to make her understand.

"I'd nod blor aby!" he shouted. "I'd blor usban!"

Elizabeth kissed him on the forehead and stood up, laughing to herself, and began to empty the wardrobe beside the bed. As Freeman remonstrated with her, struggling helplessly with the strings of consonants, she took out his dinner jacket and overcoat and folded them neatly. Then she emptied the chest of drawers, lifting out his shirts and socks, and wrapped them away inside a sheet.

After she had carried everything out she returned and stripped the bed, pushed it back against the wall, putting the baby cot in its place.

Clutching the rail of the play-pen, Freeman watched dumb-founded as the last remnants of his former existence were swiftly despatched below.

"Lisbeg, lep me, I'd—I!"

He gave up, searched the floor of the play-pen for something to write with. Summoning his energies, he rocked the cot over to the wall, and in large letters, using the spit which now flowed amply from his mouth, wrote:

ELIZABETH! HELP ME! I AM NOT A BABY!

Banging on the door with his fists, he finally attracted Elizabeth's attention, brought her back into the nursery.

When he pointed to the wall, however, the marks had dried.

Almost weeping with frustration, Freeman toddled across the cage and began to retrace the message. But before he had completed more than two or three letters Elizabeth put her hands around his waist and lifted him out, chuckling with amusement.

A single place had been set at the head of the dining-room table, a new high chair beside it. Still trying to form a coherent sentence, Freeman felt himself rammed into the seat, a large bib tied around his neck.

During the meal he watched Elizabeth carefully, hoping to detect in her large motionless face some inkling of recognition, even a fleeting awareness that the two-year-old child sitting in front of her was her husband.

Not once did she show the slightest suspicion. Freeman played with his food, smearing crude messages on the tray around his dish, but when he pointed insistently at them Elizabeth merely clapped her hands, apparently joining in his little triumphs, and then wiped the tray clean. Worn out, Freeman let himself be carried upstairs, lay strapped in the cot

under the miniature blankets, wracking his brain for some means of reminding Elizabeth of her absent husband.

Time was against him. By now, he found, he was asleep for the greater portion of each day. For the first hours he felt fresh and alert, but his energy faded rapidly and after each meal an overwhelming lethargy drugged his mind, closing his eyes like a sleeping draught. Dimly he was aware that his metamorphosis continued unchecked—when he woke he could sit up only with difficulty, and the effort of standing upright on his buckling legs tired him after a few minutes.

His power of speech had vanished. All he could produce were a few grotesque grunts, or an inarticulate babble. Lying on his back with a bottle of hot milk in his mouth, he knew that his one hope was friend Hanson. Sooner or later he would call in to see Freeman, almost certainly become suspicious when he found that Freeman had disappeared and all traces of him had been carefully removed.

Propped helplessly against a cushion on the carpet in the lounge, Freeman noted that Elizabeth had emptied his desk and taken down his books from the shelves beside the fireplace. To all intents she was now the widowed mother of a twelve-month-old son, parted from her husband since their honeymoon.

Unconsciously she had begun to assume this role. When they went out for their morning walks, Freeman in woollen coat and leggings, strapped back into the pram, a celluloid rabbit rattling a few inches from his nose and almost driving him insane, they passed many people he had known by sight, and all took it for granted that he was Elizabeth's son. As they bent over the pram, poking him painfully in the stomach, complimenting Elizabeth on his size and precocity, several of them referred to her husband, and Elizabeth replied that he was away on an extended trip. In her mind, obviously, she had already dismissed Freeman, forgetting that he had ever existed.

He realised how wrong he was when they returned from what was to be his last outing.

As they neared home Elizabeth hesitated slightly, jolting the pram, apparently uncertain whether to retrace her steps.

Someone shouted at them from the distance, and as Freeman tried to identify the familiar voice Elizabeth bent forwards and pulled the hood up over his head.

Struggling to free himself, Freeman recognised the tall figure of Hanson tower over the pram, doffing his hat.

"Mrs. Freeman, hello. I've been trying to ring you up all week. How are you?"

"Very well, Mr. Hanson." She jerked the pram around, trying to keep it between herself and Hanson, and Freeman could see that she was momentarily confused. "I'm afraid our telephone is out of order."

Hanson side-stepped around the pram, watching Elizabeth with interest. "What happened to Sydney on Saturday? Have to go off on business?"

Elizabeth nodded. "He was very sorry, Mr. Hanson, but something important came up and he had to leave on the overnight train. He'll be away for some time."

*She knew*, Freeman said automatically to himself.

Hanson peered under the hood at Freeman.

"Out for a morning stroll, little chap?" To Elizabeth he commented: "Fine baby there. I always like the angry-looking ones. Your neighbour's?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "The son of a friend of Sydney's. Well, we must be getting along, Mr. Hanson."

"Do call me Robert. See you again soon, eh?"

Elizabeth smiled, her face composed again. "I'm sure we will, Robert."

"Good show." With a roguish grin, Hanson walked off down the pavement.

*She knew!*

Astounded, Freeman pushed the blankets back as far as he could, watching Hanson's retreating figure. He turned once to wave to Elizabeth, who raised her hand and then steered the pram through the gate.

*SHE KNEW!!!*

Freeman tried to sit up, his eyes fixed on Elizabeth, hoping she would see the anger in his face. But she wheeled the pram swiftly into the passage-way, unfastened the straps and lifted Freeman out.

As they went up the staircase he looked down over her shoulder at the telephone, saw that the receiver was off its cradle.

*All along she had known what was happening, had deliberately pretended not to notice his metamorphosis! Carefully she had anticipated each stage of the transformation, the comprehensive*

*wardrobe had been purchased well in advance, the succession of smaller and smaller garments, the play-pen and cot, had been ordered for him not for the baby !*

Panicking, Freeman wondered whether she was pregnant at all. The facial puffiness, the broadening figure, might well have been illusory. When she told him she was expecting a baby he had never imagined that *he* would be the baby concerned.

Helplessly he tried to twist himself out of Elizabeth's arms, but she had recognised his hostility and dropped all pretense of affection. Handling him roughly, she bundled Freeman into his cot, secured him under the blankets.

Downstairs he could hear her moving about rapidly, apparently preparing for some emergency. Propelled by an uncharacteristic urgency, she was closing the windows and doors, switching off the refrigerator and oil heater.

As he listened to her, Freeman noticed how cold he felt. His small body was swaddled like a new-born infant in a mass of shawls and blankets, but his bones were like sticks of ice. A curious drowsiness was coming over him, draining away his anger and fear, and the centre of his awareness was shifting outwards from his eyes to his skin. This alone retained its sensitivity, the small knots in the blankets pressing into his back and legs like sharp spurs. The thin afternoon light stung his eyes, and as they closed he slipped off into a blurring limbo of shallow sleep, the tender surface of his body aching for relief.

Some while later he felt Elizabeth's hands pull away the blankets, was aware of her carrying him across the hallway. Gradually his memory of the house and his own identity began to fade, and his shrinking body clung helplessly to Elizabeth as she lay on her broad bed.

Hating the naked hair that rasped across his face, he now felt clearly for the first time what he had for so long repressed, the ceaseless quest for his mother that had been the generative power behind his metamorphosis, and which had secretly prevented him from resisting her.

Just before the end he cried out suddenly with joy and wonder, as he remembered the drowned world of his first childhood.



As the child within her quietened, turning and stirring for the last time, Elizabeth sank back limply on to the pillow, the birth pains slowly receding. Gradually she felt her strength return, the vast world within her settling and annealing itself. Staring up at the darkened ceiling, she lay resting for several hours, now and then adjusting her large figure to fit the unfamiliar contours of the bed.

The next morning she rose for half an hour, quickly preparing breakfast for herself, then returned to the bedroom. The child already seemed less burdensome, the almost insupportable pressures of its first appearance safely relieved.

Three days later she was able to leave her bed completely, a loose smock hiding what remained of her pregnancy. Immediately, when she had opened the doors and windows, she began the last task, clearing away all that remained of the baby's dirty clothing, dismantling the cot and play-pen, emptying the cupboards and wardrobe. The clothing she tied into large parcels, then telephoned a local charity which came and collected them. The pram and cot she sold to the second-hand dealer who drove down the street. Within two days she had erased every trace of her husband, stripping the coloured illustrations from the nursery walls and replacing the spare bed in the centre of the floor.

All that remained was the diminishing knot within her, a small clenching fist that pulsed with feeble strength.

When she could almost no longer feel it Elizabeth went to her jewel box, took off her wedding ring and added it to the collection of gold bands in the secret drawer below the double bottom.

On her return from the shopping centre the next morning, Elizabeth noticed someone hailing her from a car parked outside her gate.

"Mrs. Freeman!" Hanson jumped out of the car and accosted her gaily. "Wonderful to see you looking so well."

Elizabeth gave him a wide heart-warming smile, her handsome face made more sensual by the slight tumescence of her features. She was wearing a bright silk dress and all visible traces of the pregnancy had vanished.

"Where's Sydney?" Hanson asked. "Still away?"

Elizabeth's smile broadened imperceptibly, her lips parted across her strong white teeth. Her face was curiously expres-

sionless, her eyes momentarily fixed on some horizon far beyond Hanson's face, yet at the same time crossed by strange shifts of meaning.

Hanson waited uncertainly for Elizabeth to reply. Then, taking the hint, he dived back into his car and switched off the engine, rejoined Elizabeth, holding the gate open for her.

So Elizabeth met her husband. Three months later the metamorphosis of Sydney Freeman reached its final focus. In that last second, when all that remained of him was a single pulse of energy poised in a timeless interval between fusion and fission, Sydney Freeman came to his true beginning, the moment of his conception coinciding with the moment of his extinction, the end of his last birth with the beginning of his first death.

*And baby makes one.*

—J. G. Ballard

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## STUDIES IN SCIENCE FICTION

*In retrospect we can now see that Olaf Stapledon was the bridge between the early science fiction writers and their modern contemporaries. As a philosopher he worked with the broad pattern of the Universe itself—and we are all the better for his works.*

## 13. Olaf Stapledon

by Sam Moskowitz

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The most titanic imagination to ever write science fiction was undoubtedly W. Olaf Stapledon. The publication of his first work of fiction, *Last and First Men*, by Methuen, London, in 1930 was an instant critical success despite the fact that it caught both the literati and the science fiction world by surprise. Neither group had ever heard of Mr. Stapledon, nor were they prepared for the stunning cosmic sweep and fabulous grandeur of the ideas and philosophical concepts to be found in the work. The response to this book was extraordinary.

"But far and away the best book of this kind in our time—yes, I will risk it for once, a masterpiece—is Olaf Stapledon's amazing chronicle of the next two thousand million years," wrote renowned author J. B. Priestley in the *Clarion*.

"As original as the solar system," enthused the Gothic master, Hugh Walpole, in *The Book Society News*.

"There have been many visions of the future, and a few fine ones. But none in my experience as strange as *Last and First Men*. Mr. Stapledon possesses a tremendous and beautiful imagination," was the evaluation of novelist Arnold Bennett, writing for the *Evening Standard*.

These reviews were not exceptions, they were universally typical on almost all levels of the literary world.

When *Last and First Men* appeared in 1930, science fiction in magazine form was already in full flower in the United States. There were seven magazines, presenting highly advanced material and most aspects of the field had at least been probed, if not exhaustively mined. Development of science fiction as a form of literary art and more specifically as the well of new ideas, flowed from the magazines. Little appeared, even in book form, that was not strongly influenced by periodical science fiction.

William Olaf Stapledon was to prove not only the infrequent exception to this fact but one of the most pivotally powerful prime movers in the history of modern science fiction.

*Last and First Men* projects the history of mankind from 1930 to the end of recorded time—2,000 million years in the future—when one of the Last Men, through a method of temporal projection, succeeds in transmitting to his distant ancestors, the incredible saga of a history that was to become our future.

The passage of events in these past 30 years has deprived the early chapters of the book of any validity as prophecy. Nevertheless, so skilled is the presentation that the reader can easily imagine himself on a different time track and thereby retain his willing suspension of disbelief.

The history begins with a divided and warring Europe called into conference with the president of the United States and a Chinese inventor. At the meeting, which takes place in England, the Chinaman demonstrates that he has perfected an atomic bomb. At the same time as the demonstration, an American air fleet, goaded by provocative incidents, has engaged the United European air fleet in combat and destroyed it.

As the victorious American air fleet sweeps upon England, it is destroyed with atomic weapons by common consent of the government heads assembled, including America's president.

In retaliation, an enraged America almost purges Europe of life through the use of gas and deadly bacteria. A later showdown with China finds America again victorious and a world state is formed.

This is only the beginning of a rich and fertile work which widens increasingly in scope, progressing from peak to brilliantly imaginative peak. The entire panorama of mankind is spread before us. We read of the end of the Americanized era and the entrance into another dark age, eventually followed by the rise of Patagonia as a world centre of culture. The rediscovery of atomic energy causes the downfall of the Pantagonian civilization as the result of a chain explosion. In the ten million years that ensue, the monkeys rise as a competitive, intelligent race, commanding subhuman slaves. Eventually the monkeys are exterminated by their own weaknesses and the revolt of their vassals. The rise of a great new human civilization follows.

The invasion of the Martians, microscopic creatures which travel in jelly-like floating clouds like mist, results in a war between Mars and the Earth. All life is wiped out on Mars, but a destructive virus from the dust of Martian bodies sends mankind back to savagery.

A civilization of new men eventually arises which is in tune with nature and the wilderness. This race gradually advances to the point where it breeds stupendous brains which first aid and then rule all mankind. Eventually, frustrated by their physical limitations in their quest for the only thing that means anything to them—knowledge—the great brains scientifically create a race of mental and physical supermen to replace them.

The approach of the time when the moon will move so close to Earth that it will blow up and destroy the surface of the planet, forces migration to Venus. There, the contemporary intelligent life forms are destroyed, the planet reshaped and man evolves into a winged creature. Millions of years pass and it becomes necessary to migrate to Neptune when it is discovered that collision with a wandering gaseous body will cause our sun to become a nova.

On Neptune, natural and scientific progress creates a truly Utopian society, but man is drastically changed, even to the point where the number of sexes required for procreation is increased. The end of all mankind occurs when the sun unaccountably accelerates the rate at which it burns up its

energy and the heat dooms the last men before any scientific provision can be made to save the race.

However, before the end, the last men fire countless artificial human spores into space, hoping to eventually seed worlds of other suns.

The simple chronology of events fails to do *Last and First Men* justice. Stapledon deals in depth with every phase of human development, covering not only the scientific aspects but also the social, cultural, sexual, psychological and philosophical changes. The core of this book, written with only fragmentary dialogue as a straight narrative, is philosophy, and not philosophy on a sophomoric level, but that of true stature.

The events are related in a style of unique power and poetry. There is extraordinary beauty of phrasing and literally hundreds of plot ideas that have since seeded themselves in the fabric of modern science fiction.

*Last and First Men* made its American debut in 1931 and the reaction was only slightly less enthusiastic than that of Great Britain. The late Elmer Davis, renowned radio commentator, author and journalist, called it, "the boldest and most imaginative book of our times."

The sensational *New York Evening Graphic* for October 3, 1931, devoted a full page with three illustrations to the enthusiastic review of critic Lloyd Franklin who stated, "The author out-Wells H. G. Wells, out-Shaws George J. Bernard and knocks Jules Vernes for a loop."

Insurance that the impact of Stapledon would be thoroughly felt in American science fiction circles was provided by Hugo Gernsback's *Wonder Stories*, which listed *Last and First Men* in a series of full page advertisements run in 1931, making outstanding science fiction novels available to its readers.

Similarities were obvious in the famous *Man Who Awoke Series* by Laurence Manning which ran as a series of five complete stories in *Wonder Stories* from March to August, 1933. Manning's lead character is carried in a series of steps into a future which is very much like Stapledon's. There is, for example, an era ruled by giant brains, a period of a back-to-nature movement, and a finale ending on a Stapledonian philosophical note as the last men strive to determine the nature of life and the meaning of the universe.

In more recent times, the classic *City* series which, when combined into a book won *The International Fantasy Award* as

the outstanding volume of 1953, also evidenced in its form and content some influences of *Last and First Men*.

Inevitably, so successful a first novel called for a sequel and Stapledon obliged with *Last Men in London*, published in 1932 by Methuen. This fictional-philosophical tract cannot be truly appreciated without prior reading of *Last and First Men*. The title itself is completely misleading, because it does not refer to the last men *alive* in London after some disaster, as one might expect, but to a mental visit by one of the Last Men who perished on Neptune in Stapledon's *first* book back to our era and his reactions to what he sees.

Through the words of this superman observer, Stapledon is enabled to present his philosophical observations on the life and times of the period running briefly from World War I to 1932. The most fascinating part of the volume from the viewpoint of the science fiction reader is the extremely substantial elaboration on the science, life, customs and philosophy of mankind on Neptune which *supplements* material in *Last and First Men*. Though the book was not as successful as Stapledon's previous work, it did see a second edition in 1934.

Meanwhile, the literary set and the science fiction readers received a trickle of information about Stapledon's background. He was born May 10, 1886 in the town of Wirral, near Liverpool, England. His childhood was spent on the Suez. His parents had some means and he was educated at Abbolsholme School and then at Balliol College, Oxford, emerging with his Master of Arts degree. He taught a year at Manchester Grammar School, then worked in a shipping office in Liverpool, lecturing on history and English Literature evenings for the Workers' Educational Association under the auspices of the University of Liverpool.

During World War I, Olaf Stapledon served three years with the Friends Ambulance Unit, attached to French Armed Forces. Prior to World War I, he developed an interest in communism and socialism and managed to see printed two small volumes of revolutionary poetry.

Following World War I, he culminated a sporadic 12-year courtship by marrying Agnes Miller, an Australian girl. Two children, a daughter and a son, resulted from the union.

He returned to the University of Liverpool and, majoring in philosophy and psychology, received his Doctor of Philosophy

degree. He then proceeded to lecture on these subjects at the University and elsewhere.

During this period he framed the ideas for his first philosophical effort, *A Modern Theory of Ethics*, which Methuen published in 1929. Termed "A study of the relations of Ethics and Psychology," the work, as a major part of its thesis, evaluates the Freudian theory of the origin of morality and discards it in favour of an intellectual morality which is an outgrowth of the theological "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This would insist on spontaneous sympathy for even "aliens" who are known to be in need. It would obligate one to extend help even if the recipient made no direct appeal, was not a friend or a close relative and whether or not any "spontaneous sympathy" were felt—merely on the basis of the objective evidence that help was necessary.

Writing of science fiction was inspired from absorbing the efforts of H. G. Wells, Jules Verne and Edgar Rice Burroughs, but Stapledon denied any reading of science fiction magazines prior to 1936. Nevertheless, it was science fiction that made Olaf Stapledon as a philosopher.

Impressed by the immensity of his vision and his evident broad understanding of the philosophical and psychological structure of society as expressed in *Last and First Men* and *Last Man in London*, the book-reading public was pleased to learn that Stapledon was a really accredited philosopher and not a dilettante. They were ripe for *Waking World*, a militant philosophical and political discussion published by Methuen in 1934. Stapledon admits in this book that the bulk of his livelihood came from dividends on family investments, even while he proclaims, "the system on which I live must go." *Waking World* also reveals a wide respect for H. G. Wells social views.

Distinctly revolutionary in tone, Stapledon in *Waking World*, viewed the capitalistic system as a decadent order that must be discarded. He deplored violence but could find no brief for pacifism. On religion he is a bit left of agnosticism and politically a bit right of communism. His objectivity and even favour towards Communism caused one exponent to term him sentimentally as "the last of the great bourgeois philosophers."

Stapledon is admittedly most philosophically impressed by the views of Spinoza and Hegel. He was, if anything, even



more optimistic than they, expressing the thought : " Indeed it is not inconceivable that man is the living germ which is destined to vitalize the whole cosmos !"

In this period, and particularly in *Waking World*, Stapledon the philosopher, is somewhat cocky, somewhat sure of himself. It is 1934 and everything is in a deplorable state. A lot of people agree with his ideas and tell him so. His patient is the world and he precisely and confidently diagnoses its illness and cures.

The next year it was back to fiction again with *Odd John : A Story Between Jest and Earnest*, published by Methuen in 1935. *Odd John* is a story about a human mutant who is almost as far above men as men are above monkeys. It was not the first story of its type, nor even the first such outstanding story. *The Hampdenshire Wonder* by renowned British novelist J. D. Beresford, first published in 1911, handled a similar theme with such consummate artistry that it has become a science fiction classic and Stapledon has acknowledged his debt to that earlier work. The renowned American mathematician, Eric Temple Bell, writing under the name of John Taine, rendered an outstanding example of the superman, stressing biological aspects in *Seeds of Life*, which appeared in the Fall, 1931 issue of *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, Philip Wylie of *Generations of Vipers* fame, scored a hit with *Gladiator*, a novel of purely physical superman, published by Knopf in 1930. *Odd John* certainly deserves to be ranked with those novels, and unquestionably brings to focus a much more penetrating insight on the possible outlook and morality of a super being than does its predecessors.

Up to this time, Olaf Stapledon had written his science fiction with little awareness of the impact his work had made on the writers and readers of that field. Though he had frequent contacts with H. G. Wells, it was not until Eric Frank Russell, then an embryo science fiction author, called on him the summer of 1936, that he seriously related himself to the mainstream of fantastic literature.

" Since then I have been looking through a few of them (science fiction magazines) " Stapledon told Walter Gillings, publisher of the British science fiction fan magazine *Scienti-fiction*, " and I was very surprised to find that so much work of this kind was being done. My impression was that the stories

varied greatly in quality. Some were only superficially scientific, while others contained very striking ideas, vividly treated.

"On the whole, I felt that the human side was terribly crude, particularly the love interest. Also there seemed to me far too much padding in most of them, in proportion to the genuine imaginative interest."

At the time of the interview, in the Spring of 1937, the proofs of his new book, *The Star Maker*, had already been corrected. Commenting on that book, Stapledon told Gillings: "*Star Maker* is, I fear, a much wilder, more remote and philosophical work than *Last and First Men*, and may make it look rather microscopic by comparison. It will probably be my last fantastic book. I am now writing a little book on philosophy for the general public."

If any work of imaginative fiction can truly be described as a *tour de force*, that effort is *The Star Maker*. Though in actual quality of writing and inspired delineation of subject matter it did not surpass *Last and First Men*, the soaring magnificence of its concepts and breathtaking scope transcend any known work of science fiction.

Where, in *Last and First Men*, Stapledon strove to unveil the future history of mankind, in *The Star Maker* he set out to relate the entire history of the *universe*, from its creation to its end. In that framework, the 2,000 million years covered in *Last and First Men* rated little more than a sentimental episode in the perspective of the cosmos.

Commencing from a view of life on planets of other star systems, utilizing the intellectual spirit of an earthman as the observer, Stapledon places special emphasis upon the symbiotic relationship of two sub-galactic races, the Echinoderm and the Nautiloids, who are to play a key role in progress as one of the most highly developed civilizations in the universe. These chapters seem to represent the origin of modern science fiction stories based on symbiosis, including the pace-setter, *Symbiotica* by Eric Frank Russell, in the October, 1943 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*.

Far more important in its profound influence on modern science fiction is Stapledon's elaborate descriptions of galactic wars and the organization of galactic empires composed of thousands of planets. While it is possible that there may have

been some reference to galactic empires in science fiction in the past, nevertheless it is a fact that the present trend can be traced precisely back to *The Star Maker*. The galactic empires so essential to many of the stories of the modern greats of science fiction, including Robert A. Heinlein, Clifford D. Simak, Eric Frank Russell, Isaac Asimov, Murray Leinster, and literally dozens of other writers, are an inspiration of Olaf Stapledon and stem from the year 1937.

Similarly, placing the story on another star system and turning the plot on the psychology or philosophy of the inhabitants, instead of through direct action, is another tremendous contribution of Olaf Stapledon to science fiction. Such ideas virtually did not exist before the writing of *The Star Maker*.

It follows that Stapledon may well be the most important builder of the plot structure of contemporary science fiction! We discover, in the final analysis, that *Last and First Men* and *The Star Maker* are the old and new testaments of modern science fiction writers and it takes very little investigation to reveal that today's science fiction has standardized its background and approach, utilizing Stapledon's works as the bible. Older writers adopted precepts directly from his pages because of their need for a lighthouse in the imaginative immensity of Island Universes where formerly no guide existed. Newer writers accept the dogmas on faith.

In *The Star Maker*, when finally there was an end to empire-making and peace reigned, a utopia developed in which there telepathically came into being the Cosmic Mind—a state of existence where every mentally developed creature could share the ideas and experiences of all of the diverse and incalculably numerous intelligencies of the universe. To supplement mental contact there were visits between communities that took the extreme of moving entire planets out of orbit and projecting them across galactic immensities.

Efforts to move entire systems with their *suns* resulted in the startling discovery that those flaming bodies were intelligent beings with a community sense. The suns, for ethical and moral reasons, attempt to destroy the parasites that are disrupting their harmony with the infinite whole. Eventually, mental rapport was established between planetary life and the suns and a peaceful understanding concluded.

Stapledon presents the nebula as living creatures with the stars their spawn. He delves into their lives, their thoughts, their philosophy and ambitions.

Finally he braves the question of *The Star Maker*, the element creator of the universe, observable as a prodigious star of such brightness and magnitude that it could not be approached. The function of the Star Maker is to create. The entity, potentially omnipotent, begins with infantile experiments, then matures and learns from its mistakes. The intense strife and suffering of living creatures in the course of the development of the universe is part of its self education, so that the next time it casts a new universe, it can try a different tack to see if previous errors can be eliminated.

While great philosophers of history have searched man's *past* to find the answers to the riddle of life, Olaf Stapledon, with an awesome, visionary probe, explores the *future* for the same answers. By driving his imagination to its extreme, he attempts to project the ultimate development and achievements of life forms and from them determine the purpose of existence.

Dissatisfied with The Cosmic Mind as a unity, Stapledon is forced to devise a *Star Maker*, who, through mathematics, physics and spiritual need, would fill the place that religion has reserved for God.

The paper-bound vogue was in full flower in England and Pelican books, a facet of famed Penguin Books, had reprinted *Last and First Men*. Now, as non-fiction originals, they issued in 1939, Olaf Stapledon's *Philosophy and Living*. This is Stapledon's most general work of philosophy and the one most indicative of the scope of his studies and thinking on the subject, which is impressive. Actually, it is somewhat too involved for the layman, but may prove important for an ultimate evaluation of Stapledon as a philosopher, since it is the purest of his philosophical presentations.

By contrast, *New Hope for Britain*, published the same year, is really a philosophical justification for political action and an exhortation for the adoption of socialism in England as the step towards a first world state.

*Saints and Revolutionaries*, still another 1939 appearance, was published by William Heinemann, London, as part of the "I Believe" volumes, a series of personal statements by such well-known figures as J. D. Beresford, Charles Williams, Gerald Bullett and Kenneth Ingram as well as Olaf Stapledon.

As its title implies, this book is a detailed philosophical consideration of the similarities and differences of people characterized as saints or as revolutionaries. It ends with the thought that eventually the Cosmic Mind, such as suggested in *The Star Maker*, may be achieved and in accomplishing this man will have created his "mythical" God image.

Olaf Stapledon clearly foresaw World War II in his Preface to *The Star Maker*, which began with the words: "At a moment when Europe is in a danger of a catastrophe worse than that of 1914 a book like this may be condemned as a distraction from the desperately urgent defence of civilization against modern barbarism." How did such a man, obviously of extraordinarily high intelligence and sensitivity, react to the second great war in his lifetime? The answer lies in his books.

During the early part of the war, he wrote *Darkness and Light*, a work of the same style as *Last and First Men*, purporting to show two different worlds and two futures depending on whether the powers of darkness or of light won out. As far as it goes, *Darkness and Light* is certainly fascinating reading but its prime conclusion seems to be that the major hope for mankind is the coming-into-being, either artificially or through mutation, of an advanced species which will possess more of the godliness and less of the animal. *Darkness and Light*, thereby, swings *Odd John* more clearly into the perspective of Stapledon's philosophy and establishes his true reasons for exploring the superman concept.

The same year, Searchlight, another paper-back firm, issued Olaf Stapledon's newest philosophical effort, *Beyond the 'Isms'*. This work examined the major religions and political movements, and though it found them basically wanting, it drew from them the suggestion that the development of the "spirit" was the only answer to a better future. Given as a definition of "spirit" was: "The spirit manifests itself solely in personality-in-community . . . We shall always recognize that both individual and society are abstractions, and neither can exist without the other. . . . And expression of the spirit, let it never be forgotten, means development in sensitive and intelligent awareness, love and creative action."

Many of Stapledon's works of fiction are prefaced by the phrase: "This is not a novel." Meaning, that though fiction, it does not conform to the basics generally associated with a

romantic, imaginative work. No such remarks preceded *Sirius : A Fantasy of Love and Discord*, published in 1944. As a novel this is the finest of all of Stapledon's fictional efforts. It deals with experiments in England which produce a super male dog—a dog with intelligence equal and possibly higher than that of a human being. The methods by which this dog is trained, the problems of his adjustment to both human and canine society are brilliantly and incisively presented. The consequences of a love affair (with all of its implications) between Sirius, the dog, and Plaxy, the girl who raised him, provide raw, adult reading with distinct allegorical applications to the world's race situation. Within the bounds of science fiction *Sirius* is a great masterpiece, pregnant with meaning, poetic and poignant in beauty of style. With this book, Stapledon proved that regardless of the final verdict on him as a philosopher, it would be hard to dispute his polished skill as a story-teller.

The fictional triumph of his suggestion of worshipping the "spirit" as put forward in *Beyond the 'Isms* was described in Stapledon's short story, *Old Man in New World*, which appeared in 1944 as a slim volume under the auspices of P.E.N. a world association of writers originally sponsored by H. G. Wells. A group of modern saints and revolutionaries, the "agnostic mystics" start a global strike on the eve of the third world war, resulting in an American revolution and a switch in Russian policy. A world state is formed and a condition of near-Utopia attained, but in the end, Stapledon predicts a human reversion to nationalism and religion which will review, in his view, the old vicious cycle.

The final answer to how the war affected Olaf Stapledon is to be found in his novel-length prose poem titled *Death Into Life* and published in 1946. Here the exploration of mysticism as an end in itself is pronounced enough to be called a retreat. The feelings of a rear gunner of a bomber going into battle are described, followed by his death and contact with the spirits of the rest of the crew and the spirits of others who have died. Finally, these merge into "the Spirit of Man" which becomes a philosophical tool for Stapledon to explore, the past, present and the future. There are brief sections describing a tomorrow extremely reminiscent of his past works.

A non-fiction book, *Youth and Tomorrow*, issued by the St. Botolph Publishing Co., London in 1946, finds Stapledon

repeating his thesis that personality-in-community and worship of the spirit represent the only hope for improvement of the modern world. The ultimate salvation he reiterates, rests in future man biologically improving the species.

A brief return to the type of fantasy that had established his reputation came with *The Flames*, a 25,000-word science fiction tale published by Secker and Warburg, London, in 1947. Writing cogently and well, Stapledon relates the efforts of flame creatures from the sun (alluded to in *The Star Maker*), who have been stranded on earth, to convince mankind that a permanently radioactive area be established so as to make conditions more tolerable for them here. In return, they offer human society the spiritual guidance to help solve its dilemma. Suspicious of the motives of the *Flames*, the earth contact rejects salvation for fear of slavery. The story is minor, however, being little more than a review of ideas previously presented.

Stapledon never lost his interest in the prospects of interplanetary travel. He was a member of The British Interplanetary Society and delivered an address at their London session of October, 1948 on *Interplanetary Man*, in which he noted the irony of this world about to destroy itself on the threshold of reaching the stars. The entire 5,000-word address, discussing "the profound ethical, philosophical and religious questions which will undoubtedly arise from interplanetary exploration," was printed in the November, 1948 *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*.

Then occurred an experience which must have had a profound effect upon Olaf Stapledon. The National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions, labelled by newspapers as a Communist-front organization, announced with great fanfare, the organization of the Cultural and Scientific Conference for Peace, to be held in New York and to be followed by a country-wide tour. Outstanding figures from many nations were invited. Dmitri Shostakovich, noted Russian composer, was the star of the programme and represented the calibre of delegates desired from each nation. Olaf Stapledon was one of only five invited from Great Britain. Visas to all but Stapledon were refused.

Stapledon was introduced in Newark, N. J., March 30, 1949, by Millard Lampell—noted for the shooting script of the motion picture *A Walk in the Sun*—as the author of "that

magnificent fantasy, *Last and First Men* . . . speaking here today because he does not want to be the last man in the world."

The answers that had once so easily flowed from Stapledon's pen were gone. "I am not a communist," he stated with emphasis, "I am not a Christian, I am just me ! I am, however, a socialist, as are the majority of my countrymen. . . Let individualism triumph over your sense of individuality. *Forget one another's mistakes and for God's sake let's get together !*"

He returned to Europe greatly depressed. "There may be a war at any moment," he told newspaper reporters upon his return.

One more bit of fantasy was still to appear. *A Man Divided*, under the Methuen imprint in 1950.

Fantasy ?

Autobiography is the more apt term. Ostensibly concerning a man of dual personality, who seesaws between brilliant clarity of thought and action and "doltish" mass thinking, *A Man Divided* transparently presents the events and agonizing intellectual conflicts by which Stapledon fashioned his philosophy and an intimate picture of his personality and life from 1912 to 1948.

It was as if Stapledon had a strange premonition and felt an urgent need for summing up, for within months of the publication date of *A Man Divided*, William Olaf Stapledon was dead. The end came on September 6, 1950, in Cheshire, England, at the age of 64 and was attributed to a coronary occlusion.

The strangest was yet to come.

His widow, Agnes Z. Stapledon, painstakingly transcribed from his pencilled draft, a final, unfinished book of philosophy, published in 1954 by Methuen and titled *The Opening of the Eyes*. A life-long friend, E. V. Rieu, in a preface to the book, told of a final meeting with Stapledon after his return from America and a year before his death. "He had reached the goal of his thinking," Rieu said, "he had come to terms with reality ; and comprehension had been added to acceptance. There was a note of serenity in his bearing, that is a pleasure to remember now that he is gone."

This is the core of what Olaf Stapledon said in that final book :



*"Is this perhaps hell's most exquisite refinement, that one should be haunted by the ever-present ghost of a disbelieved-in God? . . . Illusion though you are, I prefer to act in the pretense of your reality, rather than from stark nothingness. Without the fiction of your existence, I am no more than a reflex animal and the world is dust."*

He had accepted God.

*"Above all I spurn the subtle lure that snares the comrades,"* he continued, *"The call of brotherhood in the Revolution, and in mankind's seeming progress! There can be no progress but the lonely climbing of each solitary soul toward you."*

He had renounced communism and socialism.

Olaf Stapledon died with his life-long mental anguish resolved.

He had attained The Cosmic Mind at last.

—Sam Moskowitz

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*It was an old house, slowly falling apart, yet something kept it from collapsing completely. Built originally by slave labour, hate was in the brickwork. Perhaps the house wanted revenge . . .*

# SACRIFICIAL

BY LEE HARDING

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All morning Martin had lain in his bed unable to move, moaning and twisting like a man imprisoned by an invisible net. His face bore a mask of impotent anger and his eyes mirrored the uneven struggle going on inside his tired body as he tried to force his unwilling muscles to move. The sweat of fear shone coldly on his white face.

When she could stand it no longer, Marcia said : "I'm going for a doctor."

"Not the doctor," he mumbled, feeling the words fall sloppily on to the bedclothes. "He can't help me . . . not now. Get somebody . . . anybody, but *get me out of this house before it's too late.*"

The effort of speech seemed to drain what little energy remained in his body. He lay back with his eyes closed and his chest rising and falling nervously. His wife watched him with wild, frightened eyes, unable to comprehend what was happening.

"I'm going," she said. "I can't see you go on like this. There should be a doctor in the town. . ."

"To hell with the doctor !" he shouted. "Bring anybody . . . anybody you can find to help me out of this house. For

God's sake, Marcia . . ." He moaned fitfully and beat the pillows with weak angry fists.

She hesitated for a moment longer, afraid to leave him in his condition. He seemed to be breathing only with great difficulty, his dry lips sucking in the air in great gulps as though each one might be his last.

She bent and kissed his damp forehead. "I'll be as quick as I can."

He nodded his head absently, eyes tightly closed. "Please . . . hurry." His words trailed off and lost themselves.

He heard the door close and her footsteps descending the stairs. A while later the Fiat coughed into life and he heard the familiar sound of gears disappearing down the driveway.

He opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling. A strange sense was stirring in the room.

The house was smiling.

He struggled again to get up from the imprisoning blankets, but all strength had long since fled his aching body. He slumped back on to the pillows.

"Damn you !" he cursed. "*Damn you !*"

At first he had found the house rather charming, in an old-world way. That was before it had begun to kill him.

"It's *old*," Marcia had said, the Fiat grinding its way up the pot-holed driveway.

"Of course it is," Martin agreed. "That's what I like about it."

And it *was* old. It dripped age all over the tiny hill it surmounted. Grey and lifeless, it lifted two weary stories high above the weed-choked grounds it bestrode and glared down at the surrounding countryside. It wore the grey sky for a cloak and dug its rotting foundations tenaciously into the dirty brown soil. A tangled, overgrown garden of trees and shrubs stretched away from the rear of its grey-stone walls. In the distance the town slumbered drowsily under a heavy sky and the ocean lapped the rugged coastline.

"You certainly picked it, didn't you ?" Marcia observed.

"Well, I'll admit it's not everybody's idea of a holiday shack," he agreed, "but it *is* only a mile or two from the town. And it *has* got atmosphere—"

"Gallons."

"—And you did want to come, remember ?"

They pulled in alongside a new model Volkswagen. Walker, the middle-aged estate agent was waiting to greet them. Martin shook hands and took charge of the keys.

"If there's anything you want," Walker said, "just drop into my office when you're in town."

"That's very decent of you," Martin said, sincerely. "I must say the house looks a bit more—appealing since the last time I was through here."

Marcia wandered in across the ancient threshold and left her husband to conduct the business talk, and entered the short hallway.

The place stank. That was her first impression and it was to last for quite a while. Behind her she heard the Volks growl into life and Martin's footsteps following her inside.

"Rather musty, isn't it?" he observed.

"That's putting it mildly."

The hallway led into the main living room. To the left, a stairway crawled sluggishly towards the upper floor. On the far side of the room another door opened into the kitchen, which in turn led into the bathroom and laundry.

Despite the relatively modern furnishing and decor, a mantle of age seemed draped over everything. It lingered in the air of the room, soiling all that looked new and shiny.

"Like an old woman with a painted face," Martin murmured.

"What was that?"

He smiled. "Just a metaphor, my dear. I said that the house reminded me of an old woman with her face all made up."

While Marcia explored the kitchen Martin started unloading their luggage from the back seat of the Fiat and lugging it upstairs to the bedroom. There were four rooms on the top floor. One large bedroom, the one they were using, a smaller one, a second bathroom and a smaller living room, or den. This latter he had already chosen for his workroom.

He left the suitcases on the bed and walked over to where the pseudo-French windows opened out on to the ivy covered balcony.

There was an excellent view from where he stood. He could see right across the rolling grasslands to the rugged coast-line of Port Campbell and out to where the sea lay quietly underneath the cloudy sky. He stood for a while, soaking in the atmosphere

"Good heavens," Marcia exclaimed, standing beside him. "How this place does smell. I'll remind you to get a few dozen air-wicks when you go into town."

Martin grinned. "That's only because it's been shut up for a while." He turned his attention to the grey-stone brickwork of the balcony. "It's easy to see this is a convict job."

Marcia watched as he thoughtfully rubbed the bare stone wall alongside the windows. The walls were made up of great stone bricks roughly two feet long by one foot thick and possibly fifteen inches high, quarried out of the earth by British convict labour a good hundred years ago.

"Judging by the looks of this mortar, it's a wonder the place is still standing," he commented. "It looks like sand—or something very much like it. It certainly wasn't meant to last."

"Well it has."

"I know. And *that* is a miracle." He motioned Marcia back inside. "I don't feel like trusting that balcony."

"Even the birds don't seem to like the place," she observed. Seeing Martin's eyebrows raised curiously she added: "Haven't you noticed? All that ivy mess and all those vines encrusted over the roof of this place and yet I didn't see one bird titivating around on top. Maybe they're afraid the roof will fall in or something."

"Or perhaps they just don't like the smell," he jabbed back. He swept her up off the floor and carried her a few steps into the room.

"Put me down," she complained.

"Husband would like a cup of coffee," he demanded, mock-seriously.

"Put me down and you might get one."

He set her down on the drab carpet and let her hurry downstairs. *Great girl*, he mused, and began unpacking the suitcases.

Somebody was watching him.

He swung around towards the doorway, expecting to see Marcia still standing there.

She wasn't.

Queer. He frowned. He had felt sure of that prickling sensation at the back of his neck that usually meant that someone was watching him. Odd—come to think of it, he hadn't really felt that it was coming from the direction of the open doorway. More, sort of, well—from all around him.

That was stupid.

He let his eyes wander around the room in a puzzled manner. Then he shrugged a trifle sheepishly and went downstairs to see how coffee was coming along.

They had an early dinner that evening. Afterwards, Martin went upstairs to his den and began sorting out the mess of typescript in his briefcase preparatory to getting some serious work done on old Lord Agnew's family history. Marcia settled down with her portable radio in the living room to listen to the year's Bayreuth Festival broadcast.

After an hour or so Martin became restless. His ideas seemed to be clogging together inside his head. He knew the signs. They usually preceded a dead spot in his writing. He knew better than to fight them. He put the cover on his typewriter, switched off the light and went downstairs.

The familiar strains of Wagner greeted him as he made his way across the living room. Marcia had her feet up on the sofa and curled under the folds of her dressing gown. She turned down the volume on the portable when she saw the troubled look in his eyes.

"Something the matter?"

"Just a dead spot. I'll be over it in the morning—I hope. What are you listening to?" He sat down beside her, his brow furrowed thoughtfully and his mind a million miles away. She knew the signs, too.

"Act three of *Die Walkure*," she said, grinning mischievously. Wagner had never been one of her husband's favourite composers, although he was a tolerant enough listener. "Rather appropriate, don't you think?" She added. "I mean, it suits the atmosphere, doesn't it?"

"What's life without a little dig here and there?" He got up. "I think I'll have a look around while you're listening to that caterwauling."

"Whatever for?"

"I'm curious about this old joint. Was the first time I passed by it when old Agnew was giving me the Cook's tour of the countryside. There should be a place for it in the book somewhere. God knows it looks ancient enough. It must have an awful lot of history buried somewhere."

Marcia wrinkled her nose. "*Buried* is the word."

He left her with Wagner and went exploring. The kitchen was, as he had already noticed, the most modern part of the old house. It seemed completely out of character when compared to the external appearance of the house: modern l.l.c.f. refrigerator; built-in cupboards painted in contrasting shades of pink, grey and lemon; octagonal kitchen table with matching chairs in pink laminex. It didn't seem right, somehow. He opened the back door and stepped out.

The transition was shattering. Outside, the shadow shapes of trees and bushes seemed to stretch towards infinity. It was like stepping into another world completely, a world more in character with the age of the house itself. Moonlight fell through ragged gaps in the overcast sky, illuminating the scene with a tranquil beauty that daylight denied. By the piercing light of the sun it would stand revealed as the dead and decaying tangle of bush it was, like an elderly woman suddenly caught beneath the penetrating callousness of fluorescent light.

Something, Martin mused, that even the birds would shun, as Marcia had pointed out, half-jokingly. Yet moonlight gave it all a strange mantle of enchantment. It seemed an odd choice of word, but it was the one that sprang most readily to Martin's lips.

He closed the door behind him and was again caught in the angry glare of the kitchen. He wandered out and through the laundry until he came to another door and a short flight of steps leading downwards.

The cellar. That should be interesting. He switched on the light and darkness fled from beneath him. It was only a few steps to the empty earth floor below, but as he descended he could almost consciously feel the depths of age creep up around him until he seemed to be wallowing in its bitter, acrid taste. And when he stood at last on the hard floor he felt a peculiar feeling of guilt. All around him the walls and ceiling were rotten with age. Great pits gaped between the stonework; the floor was littered with decaying masonry. This close to the ground the hopelessness of the rotten foundations was only too evident. Everything was so terribly old and dying. For the second time he marvelled that the place was still standing.

And why did he feel this strange guilt? It was the same way he would have felt if he had surprised an old lady with her make-up off.

The dank air of the cellar pressed in upon him and for a moment he found it difficult to breathe. He turned and almost had to struggle back up the short flight of stairs. His head had begun to ache. He could feel the well of age dragging at his feet as he toiled upwards, almost as if it were trying to swallow him up, claim him. And with it came the feeling that somebody was watching him.

The feeling persisted even after he had locked the cellar door behind him. He walked a trifle shakily into the living room.

"You don't look well," Marcia said, concernedly. "You're white."

"I've got a headache. Or something. I'll be all right in the morning."

"Why don't you go to bed, honey? You've done a lot of driving today."

"I know. I think I will. Got a busy day tomorrow."

Marcia watched him make his way a trifle unsteadily up the stairs, a worried look on her pretty face. She had known him to get upset over a book before, but never to this degree. Perhaps he was just tired, after all. When she heard the door of the bedroom close she leaned over and switched off the portable and followed him.

He didn't sleep well—he didn't sleep at all. When the alarm clock shrilled at eight-thirty he had already been sitting at his card table for well over an hour. He was still contemplating the mountain of typescript before him but his mind refused to budge. His head ached dully from lack of sleep and his mouth felt like the bottom of a birdcage. Marcia brought him in a cup of steaming hot coffee and a few sandwiches. He mumbled a thick 'thanks' and tried to work up an interest in the work before him. It wasn't any use. Lord Agnew and his ancestors had never been so uninteresting.

Marcia was tidying up the kitchen when she heard his footsteps coming into the living room.

"Honey, I'm taking a run into town," he called out. "Anything you want while I'm in there?"

"You could pick up a couple of those air-wick things," she answered, coming out into the room. "The place is still a bit stuffy."

She was dressed in a simple cotton skirt with a blouse open at the throat. A pair of things clung to her slender feet and her dark hair was pulled up into a pony tail. Her face shone with



that freshly-scrubbed look that Martin often admired, only this morning the effect seemed to pass unnoticed. Her husband looked haggard and tired.

She put her arms around him and rubbed her chin against his shoulder. "You might pick up something for yourself while your at it. You could do with a tonic or something." She pulled away and studied him. "I don't know what's got into you the last few days."

"It's nothing." He kissed her absently on the lips. "Just over-work, I guess. There's so much I've got to get sorted out yet. I never seem to get started. Blast these damned family histories!"

He looked down at her face, so full of concern. His frustration softened. "You want to come along for the ride?"

She shook her head. "Not today, Maybe tomorrow—or the day after. I want to get the place tidied up a bit, make it more lived-in. You run along."

"Okay." He kissed her goodbye and walked towards the door.

He paused before stepping out into the sunlight, trying to dispel the odd lethargy that seemed to hover around him. It was like trying to shake free a mental cobweb.

It had seemed a good idea to rent the place for a few weeks. His main intention had been to soak up a bit of atmosphere and hope to transmit some feeling of it into the book he was working on. The Agnew family had been a dry enough lot as it was, they could do with some 'atmosphere'—at least that was the way he thought at the time. And then Marcia had thought it would be a good idea for *both* of them to get away from the city for a while. Strange, but it seemed that his original idea was working only too well. He had somehow managed to form a pretty strong mental rapport with the old house itself. So strong, indeed, that it was pushing all other thoughts out of his head.

He stepped out into the sunlight. There was a swish and a thud and a great grey-stone slab buried itself deeply into the ground a few inches from his right foot. It took him a frozen moment to realise that another few inches and his skull would have been crushed to pulp. The sweat broke out suddenly all over his body. He looked up but couldn't see where the huge brick had fallen from.

*The place must be rotten, he realised, a chill creeping up his back as he contemplated the nearness of death at that precise moment. That was close. I must tell Walker to have the roof checked.*

Still shaking, he walked over to the car. It was just possible, he mused, that the mortar had given way at that precise instant. Perhaps it had been balancing on the verge of tipping over for years.

*But just at that exact instant . . .* The sobering thought was enough to worry any man as imaginative as Martin Grant.

He started up and headed towards town. He had only been driving for a few minutes before he realised that the feeling of fatigue was slowly lessening. The further away he drove from the house the less the cobwebs stuck in his head. Probably the fresh air, he reasoned, and wound the windows down still further. He felt good.

Arriving in town he purchased a couple of air-wicks for Marcia and a bottle of APC from the chemist for his headaches. Then he drove down to Walker's office.

"Ah, good morning, Mister Grant," the agent beamed. "And how are you settling in?"

Martin shrugged. "Okay, I guess. But you'd better send somebody out to check the roof." He explained the incident of the falling brick, feeling the chill creep up his spine with familiar fingers as he did so.

Walker was immediately apologetic. "I'm sorry about that."

"That's handy."

"No, I really am. I'll have it seen to as soon as possible. It could be dangerous."

"You're telling me. And by the way, I was wondering if you could help me out with a little information?" The agent raised his eyebrows enquiringly. "It's about the house," Martin went on. "I'm rather curious about its history. The place looks ancient enough to have predated the town itself. Frankly, it's got me in. If it has any interesting part to play in the town's history then I might include it in my book."

Walker was already familiar with Martin's reason for renting the house. He was a very old friend of Lord Agnew. It had been the Old Boy himself who had seen to it that the dump had been 'done out' a bit before Martin arrived. Hang

the expense, of course. The dear old Lord wanted his favourite writer to be comfortable.

"I can't tell you much, Mister Grant," he said, doubtfully. "Frankly, I don't think there's much to tell. All I know is that it went up around fifty seven or thereabouts. It's been deserted since around the turn of the century—I don't know why. It's on Lord Agnew's property so I suppose he just left it there after he bought the land."

Martin looked disappointed.

"If you'll give me a few days," Walker added, "I'll see what I can dig up locally. Surely some of the older members of the community might have something to tell about the old house. But I doubt if you'll find anything interesting enough to put in your book. Frankly, Mister Grant, and you'll understand I'm meaning this just between ourselves, but the place is really nothing more than a derelict. I can't for the life of me see how it stands up."

"Me neither," Martin agreed. "Fascinating isn't it?" He stood up and thanked the agent and took his leave.

The nearer he drew towards the house the more heavily the familiar feeling of depression began to settle around him. Martin was by no means a believer in supernatural phenomena, nor was he sceptic. That there was decidedly something unusual about the house that manifested itself in his mind he was now sure. But how to define it?

He left the car and walked into the house with heavy feet.

"Martin?" His wife's voice called out from the kitchen.

"I got those things for you," he answered, fumbling in his pocket for the brown-paper package.

"I can't get this darned griller to work," she complained. "Have a look at it for me, will you, hon?"

He grunted impatiently as he entered the kitchen. "What's the matter with it?"

Marcia shook her head. "I don't know. I've been trying to get it going for ages so as I can pop on a couple of those steaks out of the 'frige, but it just *won't* heat up. All it does is make funny noises."

"Funny noises? Here, let me have a look at it." He grabbed hold of the handle and turned it over to inspect the wiring.

Something picked him up and slammed him back against the refrigerator door with stunning force.

"Martin!"

A great hammer belted the wind out of his lungs and a huge hand slapped him down on to the floor. After that everything went black for a while. Much later he opened his eyes. His heart was pounding erratically and Marcia had her arms around him and was crying in great, broken sobs.

His first words were : " You could have told me . . . it was switched on. Must have had a short . . . in it."

It was a little while before he found the strength to sit up. His body felt like jelly. It must have been quite a dose of juice, he reflected, surprised that he was still alive. Marcia fussed over him with great care. Her eyes were all red and swollen and her face streaked with tears.

" I'm sorry darling," she said. " I thought it was off. I'm sure it was."

" You were that sure it almost killed me," he grunted, sourly annoyed at her carelessness. He struggled to his feet and made his way shakily across the room to inspect the switch on the wall. It was in the ON position. " What did I tell you ?"

Marcia shook her head, puzzled. " But I'm certain it was off. Good heaven's Martin, I'd been fiddling with it myself before you came in. Why didn't I get a shock ?"

*Why indeed ?*

A familiar chill enveloped his stomach as he stared down at the griller. His mind flashed back earlier in the day to the falling brick that had narrowly missed cracking open his skull. And now *this*. His eyes strayed back to the switch that Marcia had insisted had been in the OFF position.

Could it have . . . moved ? Could it have *been* moved ? He braked his galloping imagination to a halt. No sense in getting all worked up over a little accident.

" Are you sure you feel okay ?" his wife asked, staring at his pale, washed-out features.

" Sure . . . sure. I'll be all right." He brushed one hand across his eyes but the cobwebs were still there. " I'll fix this lead and then we'll have a cup of coffee. I don't feel like anything for lunch . . . yet. I'll be okay in a while. That was quite a kick, you know."

He reached over and very determinedly switched the plug OFF. As an afterthought, he pulled the plug out of the socket. No sense in taking chances.

His head seemed to clear a little after the coffee and a few APC. They sat for a while in the kitchen, Marcia going over the details of the incident, Martin anxious to forget it and get on with his work. He didn't like the way his mind was working. He wanted to give it a more sensible direction.

After a while he went back upstairs to do battle with the Agnew biography. Marcia took the Fiat and went into town to do some shopping she had originally intended to do the following day. He couldn't blame her for wanting to get out of the house. She had probably had more of a fright than he himself.

He wallowed for about half an hour in the Lord's biographical notes and didn't seem to be any nearer sorting them into shape. It annoyed him that he had made such meagre progress with the work since his arrival at the house. It didn't seem like a good idea after all. Not if it was going to effect his productivity like this. Why had the house taken command of his thoughts so much? Indeed, just what was so interesting about the old dump that caused such a profound and disturbing element to creep into his thoughts?

He pulled out his notebook and re-read the sparse information Walker had supplied him. Not much to go on. And yet—why did the house impress him with its significance?

His mind began to wander again. His eyes drifted slowly over the walls of the room, marvelling yet again at the miracle that had enabled the carelessly thrown-together slabs of grey-stone to stand upright for so long. Miracle—or something else?

A picture slowly formed in his mind, in the private recess reserved for his creative thinking. A picture of a few dozen men toiling in the sun, men with dirty, unshaven faces covered with sweat and chains around their legs and the dead light of hopelessness in their eyes. Convicts. He could see them grunting and straining and swearing as they struggled to lift the heavy blocks into place and secure them with a messy, half-hearted mortar mixed from whatever was available. Somewhere nearby a trooper would be standing, a tall, good-looking figure with his uniform a little dusty and his moustache in need of a trim. Martin imagined him watching the men with a contemptuous sneer staining his smooth features and his hand resting always on his holstered pistol. He might have a whip in his hand, which he would use when he had to, or whenever he just felt like it.

It wasn't a pretty picture. He studied the dull ceiling of the room with its drab coat of paint and he felt the anger, humiliation and despair of its builders calling across the century. How much agony must have gone into the erection of a house like this, he wondered? Could the walls still reek with it, the air still carry it?

This was a facet of Australian history that had always appalled him—the merciless exploitation of convict labour in the early days of the colony. He would try and explain that somewhere in his history of the Agnew family. But he would have to be tactful about it.

The familiar feeling began to settle around him. Like being watched—only more dispersed. He looked slowly around the room and, as he had expected, there was nobody in the room. What was causing him to feel the way he did? Was it the compassion he felt for the dead who had made this house possible? Could he still feel their anguish and their tears crying out from the brick and mortar heavy with a hundred years of decay?

How many lives, he wondered, went into the construction of this single house? How many men, weak with exhaustion and burnt by an angry sun, hungry for lack of decent food and driven mad by scurvy and dissentry had collapsed over the naked brickwork of the house? And how many other huts and mansions and roadways had cost a similar amount in human life?

The feeling strengthened. He was getting somewhere after all. It was easy now, to imagine the men, seeing their companions whipped, beaten, perhaps dead, grimly carrying on the work for some overseeing despot, some Lord, some Commissioner, some Governor, and finding in their work the courage to survive another day, another week—perhaps another year. The will to survive becoming the will to produce something decent and strong that would survive long after their short lives lasted and would endure and be worth the price its building cost. Just a house, Martin mused, feeling the waves of time lapping around him. A house that should have collapsed half a century ago, yet something still managed to hold it together. Could nothing more than a will to endure make an inanimate object exist past its natural life span? It was an interesting theory. At least it indicated that the old grey matter was working well, Martin realised, pleased with his bit of fantasy weaving.

He closed the notebook thoughtfully. At that moment an intense feeling invaded the room. He could literally feel it spreading between the walls like an intangible aroma. His mind savoured the outer edges and then withdrew, half in caution, half in fear.

The house was *alive*.

Somebody was watching him, all right, watching him from *all around*. Its eyes were in the walls, the ceiling, the furniture. Even the air was capable of observing his every move.

*This is crazy*, his mind protested. *I've just worked myself up into a state of hysteria over nothing—nothing at all.*

Except—how did an inanimate object achieve awareness? How does a motor car respond after years of patient driving in rapport with an affectionate owner? A ship? An airplane? Anything? Was it really possible, after all, for man to invest a machine or an object with a life force generated by his own insatiable longing?

The idea was unthinkable. He was getting too deep into the subject. Better to bail out before . . .

His head began to spin. He felt giddy and tried to rise. "Marcia!" he called out. The feeling of depression was overwhelming.

"Marcia!" he shouted, desperately, and struggled to his feet. That was all he remembered. He passed out over the card table.

A voice was calling him from out of the thick grey mist that enveloped him.

"Trust you to fall asleep on the job."

He opened his eyes. Slowly. His head was lying on its side and he was staring at a glass held in a familiar hand.

"Here, try this for size," Marcia said.

He sat up, taking the glass of whiskey thankfully and staring around the room in a puzzled manner. He rubbed his eyes and tried to make sense out of the residue of dreams and memories cluttering up his skull. The whiskey helped to burn away a few of the cobwebs.

The feeling was gone. The house was no longer studying him.

"Feel better?"

He nodded. "Must have dozed off." The lie came quickly to his lips. Or was it a lie? Maybe he had been dreaming all that nonsense about the house . . .

Maybe.

Marcia stayed for a while, rambling on about the town and her amusing encounters with some of the local gossips and then, seeing he was in one of his moods, she left him alone and went back downstairs.

He brooded for a long time. He tried to reassure himself that his mind was producing fantasies out of all proportion to the information available. It didn't work.

He got up and walked over and opened the windows wide and let the fresh air flush out the phantoms of his imagination. Sunlight pounced hungrily on the furniture and he stood, wondering, while the walls of the house resumed their familiar staring.

He shivered. Perhaps he was going crazy after all.

And that was the first time he sensed that the house was amused. But it soon changed to a feeling of deadly malevolence.

The next day it tried to kill him again.

Trying to sleep was a nightmare in itself. He tossed all that night, unable to reconcile himself to the fact that the walls around him were not a living entity. At times he imagined he could feel low, trembling sighs ripple through the house, but that was probably only his imagination. But nothing could explain the weight of air pushing down upon him. A number of times he felt he was suffocating and woke out of a drowse to find that the bedclothes had worked their way over his head.

Marcia slept soundly. That was only to be expected, his feverish mind reasoned. The house had nothing against her. Why did it focus its malevolence upon him to such a degree? Wasn't there some way they could come to terms?

And there was. But they were the house's terms—not his own.

In the morning, while Marcia showered, he went downstairs to prepare a light breakfast. He had mentioned nothing to his wife about his dreams and his feelings, which was just as well. She would have given short shift to that sort of talk.

His mind was still deep in thought as he made his way down the short flight of stairs.

Afterwards, he was never quite sure how it happened. One moment his feet touched heavy carpet, the next they were sliding uselessly against a greasy, glassy surface that denied him foothold. His arms flailed out desperately to forestall his



headlong descent to the floor below. He fell and rolled upon a frictionless slope that should have been the stairway. The floor came towards him with appalling suddenness. His left arm caught and held a railing, his arm almost jerked from its socket. His legs swung up against the bannister with a heavy thud.

He was still sitting on the stairs nursing his bruises when Marcia came down.

"Whatever's the matter?"

"I slipped," he grunted, rubbing the bruised flesh along his left elbow. "The damn carpet must have been loose or something." But that wasn't the proper explanation—he knew it. But how could he tell her what he really thought?

"Are you all right?" She inspected his arm concernedly, adding. "My, but we have been in the wars lately, haven't we?"

He smiled sourly and that was enough sign for her to leave him alone. He watched her disappear into the kitchen and then turned his angry attention towards the silent walls of the room.

How does a stairway turn to glass beneath your feet? he asked, silently, his face a mask of anguish. How does friction between shoe and carpet suddenly disappear, to send you falling—almost—to a broken neck on the concrete floor below? He winced at the memory of the closeness of his fall.

He had to get out of the house for a while.

After a breakfast of the familiar coffee and APC, he suggested a little fishing expedition along the coastline. Marcia accepted gladly, anxious to get her husband out of this unfamiliar lethargy.

They left just before midday. As with his previous break from the house, he felt the feeling of oppression dwindle the further he drove. It confirmed many of his theories and strengthened his resolve to get to the bottom of the mystery. The house didn't *like* him, that was easy to figure out. But *why*? And why was it trying to maim—or kill—him? *What had he done*?

The day was a failure. Martin spent most of the time in the hired boat staring vacantly at the sea, his fishing line trailing uselessly in the water, his thoughts morosely divorced from reality. Marcia put up with it for several hours before her patience snapped and she demanded to be taken back to the house. His agreement was too obviously relieved.

"I don't know what's getting into you, Martin Grant," she complained, her eyes dark with frustration. "If you don't snap out of this mood of yours pretty damn smart then I'm packing my stuff and going home. You can stay here and finish your damned book whenever you please?"

"I'm sorry, Marcia," he said, and meant it. But how could he explain to her?

As they approached the house he could feel the hungry fingers of hatred reaching out for him. He shivered and suddenly felt cold, and wondered what was scrambling his reason in such an irrational manner.

A house can't be *alive*, he kept telling himself. But this one was, another voice insisted. *This one . . .*

He drove up the driveway and felt the depression settling around him, the cobwebs smothering his thoughts. His hands were shaking as he opened the front door. Once inside, Marcia stalked angrily upstairs and slammed the bedroom door.

Martin stood alone in the living room, her last words echoing in his skull.

"*It's the house, isn't it?*" she had said, coldly.

Martin had nodded. "*I suppose it is. You know how it is, honey. I smell a story. And when I'm like that . . .*"

"*I know,*" she interrupted, her voice sounding very tired.

"*You can't think of anything else, can you?*"

"*No,*" he had answered. "*That's wrong, and you know it.*"

"*You can be damned sure I'm not going to spend two weeks like this,*" she snapped, irritably. "*I'll be reasonable. You can poke around in your crummy little house to your heart's content for another day and if you haven't come out of this broody mood of yours then I'm going home. And that's final.*"

And she meant it, too.

But he didn't care. Not now. Not when there was something more important, more vital, to think about.

You can't go thinking of a house as a sentient being, his mind cautioned. He cast the warning aside and instead let his imagination absorb the impressions building up around him in the empty room. His awareness increased until he imagined he could sense the great, beating pulse of the house throbbing expectantly.

He didn't pause to wonder how the inanimate brick and mortar of the house had achieved awareness. Perhaps it was a

secret connected with the builders, an army of dead men sweating their lives into the great stone blocks and letting the mess of sand and cement absorb some of their bitter frustration. Or was it merely his own probing, challenging mind that could discern this awareness?

And the animosity? That was something he had to find the reason for.

He walked through the kitchen and out into the laundry and stood facing the cellar door. Somehow it had always seemed that the focus of all the deadly emanations lay beyond that door.

He opened it and looked down into the bare room below.

A great torrent of age washed out and engulfed him as he stood with his hand on the door. The bitter tang of decay enveloped him and made his head swim. The odour of death hung heavily in his nostrils. It was like trying to move through a thick fog engulfing his mind and body. His steps moved hesitantly down the stairs; he had to steady himself against the wall, his eyes closed momentarily against the blast of sensations.

The stone wall crawled convulsively beneath his hand like a live thing. He snatched his hand away and stood swaying in the ocean of age. His mind was numb with the shock of his discovery. All around him the walls of the cellar pulsed hungrily with life, the very air seemed potent with awareness. The corners seem to glare at him like the half-dead eyes of some starving animal.

He struggled against the encroaching darkness and turned his steps back towards the open doorway. The revolting pool of decay grabbed at his legs and rendered him stricken with fear. The tendrils of death twitched at his face, his hands, his body.

Sweat broke out on his forehead as he battled to make his feet move. Inch by slow inch, he began to make his way back up the steps. The pull of age was strong, but somehow he managed to make the laundry floor and shut the door behind him. He leant against it, breathing in great, irregular gasps, all strength drained from his body.

Even here, he realised, age had crept in and stained the painted walls. His bleary eyes could discern patches where the once glossy paint had peeled and cracked away to reveal the ancient, crumbling walls. He stumbled across the room, his hands clasped tightly to his head. He felt sick. Very sick.

The house followed him, hungrily.

"Leave me alone!" he snarled, defiantly. "*Leave me alone!*" He staggered into the living room, his world whirling madly around him. "Marcia," he called out. The words sounded like a faint croak. It was all he could muster.

"Marcia, Marcia . . ." His head spun giddily and he fell down on the thick carpet, the carpet that tried to crawl into his mouth and choke him. He moaned and rolled over on to his back and felt it curling and humping as it tried to reach his mouth.

He was mumbling incoherently when Marcia reached him. She poured a jolt of brandy and held it to his lips with shaking hands. Her eyes were pools of fear.

His lips fumbled with the glass. The fires burnt into his guts and he could see again. Little by little, he managed to sit up.

"I'm going for the doctor," Marcia said. "I knew there was something worrying you more than the book. . ."

His eyes fled into mad pits of fear. "It's the house." The words were out before he could stop them, spurred on by a nervous tongue. He looked in her eyes and said, helplessly, "It's trying to kill me."

She looked shocked. "What are you trying to tell me, Martin?"

"I mean that it wants to kill me. It's tried a couple of times already. Why does it hate me Marcia, why?"

She stood up, an odd look in her eyes. A look of uncertainty. "I'm going for the doctor," she repeated.

The words didn't seem to mean anything to him. He stood up unsteadily and put one hand to his forehead. "Oh, my head." He took a few weak, short steps. "I think I'll lay down for a while."

In some dark corner of his mind, what remained of his reason was telling him to get the hell out of the house. But some other force had control of his feet and was directing them methodically towards the stairs and up to the bedroom. All he wanted to do was rest and let sleep re-order his scrambled brains. *To sleep . . .*

Marcia helped him up the stairs, wondering why he watched each step carefully before letting his foot down. And then, when at last he lay weak and helpless on the bed the fever fell hungrily upon him.

For the rest of the afternoon he lay in a drugged stupor. Marcia watched over him, afraid to leave him and cursing the lack of a telephone. Dusk became night and night journeyed into morning with the inevitability of death. She felt the dawn light creep unobtrusively through the windows and gently touch her red-rimmed eyes, she was afraid now, more deeply afraid than ever before. Afraid for her husband's sanity. Over and over again his last words repeated themselves to her as he lay in his drugged sleep.

Shortly after dawn he stirred to a brief period of awareness. For a moment his eyes stared out at here with the familiar clarity of sanity and she couldn't ignore the silent plea for help in their troubled depths.

"Marcia," he managed to say, almost inaudibly. And then, painfully: "Help me . . ."

And then the struggle began. She watched it crawl across his white face like a living thing, distorting it into demoniac lines. She felt sickened in her heart and body. He moaned and twisted like a man caught in some invisible net, staining the bedclothes with the sweat of his struggle. Finally, when she could stand it no longer, she made up her mind to go for the doctor. He listened to her and nodded his head slowly, the distant film settling over his eyes. And then he cried out in that terrible, frightened voice, that a doctor was no good and to bring somebody, anybody to help get him out of the house *before it was too late*.

She left him with a sick, frightened heart hammering within her breast and raced down to the car.

Martin lay staring up at the ceiling. *I'm not going to die, he kept telling himself. I've done nothing to die for. Why are you doing this to me? Why?*

*What have you got against me, old house?*

Nothing, he realised. The house didn't care.

For a moment the pressure eased from around him and his thoughts cleared a little. With sudden desperation he lurched upwards and felt the bedclothes fall back. With one bound he was standing on the floor on his shaky legs and bewildered by his accomplishment. He stood there shivering while the walls closed in around him.

"Damn you, old house!" he screamed. "*Damn you!*"

And the house screamed back. He clapped both his hands to his ears and ran, ran out of the room and down the hall as fast as his fear-crazed feet would carry him.

"Marcia, Marcia! Oh, for God's sake help me . . .  
*Marcia!*"

And as his feet reached the landing he realised that the insane scream of the house had changed to a triumphant laughter.

His flying feet descended an endless slope of glass.

When Marcia arrived back with the doctor they found Martin's body lying at the foot of the stairs. His neck was twisted in a grotesque angle. She screamed once and the scream had not yet died when the doctor made his brief examination.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Grant," was all he could say. "A very definite broken neck." His voice faded away while his eyes pondered the staircase and wondered at the fluke that had brought death from such a short fall. But the floor was rock and hard enough to break a man's skull if he fell the right way. It was the expression of abject terror on the man's face that repelled him. He had never seen one quite like it.

Marcia stared at the body like a lost soul. Dry grief gnawed away inside of her. "I shouldn't have left him," she said, over and over again. "I shouldn't have left him."

"It wasn't your fault. He just slipped and fell, that's all. I'll have to get an ambulance up here and . . ."

She wasn't listening to him. Her mind was wandering, remembering the little things Martin had said before he died. The silly little things.

"He said that the house was trying to kill him."

The doctor looked at her curiously. "What did you say Mrs. Grant?"

"He said the house was trying to kill him, that it had already tried." Her eyes lit up. "That's right . . . the griller. That's what he was trying to tell me." She stared at the cold walls of the room, her eyes trying to pierce the paint and discover the horror beneath. And was it just her imagination or did she sense that the house was . . . satisfied. Or had she, too, been caught up in her husband's own dread imaginings?

He had said that the house was trying to kill him, and now it had succeeded. Anguish wracked her body as she sought reason amongst the shambles of her love.

She walked slowly over to the window and gazed dully out at the world beyond. The doctor kept a thoughtful eye on her as he attended to Martin's body.

*Why?* she asked, soundlessly. Why had Martin had to die?

Outside, the sun shone down a golden mantle on the garden bursting with blossoms. A flight of birds whirled up from the bushes and circled towards the house.

She screamed. The doctor ran over and held her around the shoulders as the screams poured out in a torrent that shook them both.

The flight of birds sang merrily as they alighted on the rich carpet of greenery covering the roof of the house. And the garden was bursting with new blossoms—yet it was the middle of autumn. The house had discarded its grey cloak of melancholy for a glittering crown of sunshine. A dreary mask of age had sloughed away and fresh strength surged down into the earth to renew rotting foundations and make them new again.

A passerby would have been understandably enchanted by the idyllic little house surrounded by its old-world charm and nestling contentedly amidst its richly carpeted grounds.

A new peace settled over the house and it settled down to face the march of years until once again the gnawing mice of age demanded an offering to forestall the last and final decay.

The house was *young* again.

—Lee Harding

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In the next issue of

## SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

# Should Tyrone Fail

by LAN WRIGHT

A long complete interplanetary novelette

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*Nobody seemed to go anywhere any more; the great god Television had slowed the city down so that even the people no longer had enquiring minds—but somewhere someone wondered...*

# THE FOOD GOES IN THE TOP

BY WILL WORTHINGTON

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Mr. Beavers was in a rancid mood when he came up out of the subway on Saturday evening. It had been a disturbing week. Two incidents conspired to make it so—two, that is, which could be clearly defined, described and blamed for his darkening mood, but these events were only superficially discrete; on some unlighted level of mind where common logic had no authority, where any question commencing with “why” was a disembodied hand groping in emptiness, these incidents were somehow connected. More than that, some unknown catalytic agent united them to produce a series of images which were likewise disturbing because they were familiar images jarred out of their usual context and so rendered new and strange. All the way uptown—nineteen blocks—he had struggled to marshal these thoughts, whip them into some meaningful sequence and so exercise their demonic powers, but his efforts had only raised more dust.

On Monday morning an hysterical female clerk had run screaming through the offices of Albumin, Ltd. Old Mr. Byles



of the Shipping Department had died at his desk and she had found him there. Beavers had helped put him on a stretcher when the ambulance came, but they had encountered grotesque difficulties. The old man's body was curved—just as though he were shaped that way for the purpose of bending over bills of lading—and kept tumbling from the stretcher.

It had been necessary for Beavers to hold the old man's hairless ankle while the body was borne through the clots of curious employees to the waiting ambulance. The expressions, or perhaps the absence thereof, on the faces of the others had shocked him then. They were all faces which should have been familiar to him, but he might have been walking through an aquarium of weird tropical fish. Some even smirked—so it had seemed. No one knew Byles well, though he had been with the firm of Albumin Ltd. for twenty-three years.

Mr. Beavers had reflected later that he really knew nothing of Mr. Byles, though he had certainly spoken to him often enough. If Byles had ever mentioned a family, a hometown, a life beyond Albumin, Ltd., the intelligence had gone the way of such facts as old high-jumping records and the dates of obscure acts of Congress. To all intents he had come from nowhere, unannounced, and silently like the ambulance, which as swiftly and silently took him away again.

There had been a notice on the main bulletin-board to the effect that employees could have time off to attend funeral rites on Wednesday. This was pointedly addressed to people in the Shipping Department. Mr. Beavers had not attended. He was in the Accounting Department.

The second incident that served to make the week distinct from all other weeks Beavers could remember happened on Thursday. A notice on the bulletin board announced that placement examinations were to be given to certain qualified younger employees, presumably to select trainees for future junior executive positions. Clearly it did not apply to men like Beavers, who had never seriously considered advancing themselves beyond the comfortable sphere of their known capabilities, and it had not occurred to Beavers to feel "out of it" in any way. Or it wouldn't have occurred to him if it hadn't been for the inane comment passed by one of the more offensive office boys who happened to be standing there while Beavers was reading the bulletin board. Rizzio, the kid's name was . . . one of those papuliferous young louts who always has something snide to contribute to any situation.

"Happy is the clot

who has found his proper slot . . ." said the kid, and a girl next to him had giggled in a wax-loosening voice.

"What did you say?" Beavers had demanded, although he had heard the impertinent jingle quite clearly.

"Don't let it bug ya, Dad," the kid had replied. There had been nothing to do but stalk away from the scene. To himself he had said "Not even a week after poor old Byles . . ." and then it had occurred to him that his complaint and sense of outrage was based on an irrelevancy. What had Byles to do with it? Why, for that matter, should Rizzio's wry comment touch Melvin P. Beavers of the Accounting Department? Why indeed? Nevertheless it did.

After that Mr. Beavers had begun to notice things, but his observations exploded upon his awareness one at a time. Taken singly, they were as senseless as the random forms of puzzle-pieces, but by their very randomness they suggested—and persistently—that they were part of a picture not yet seen. The dirtiness of the subway was a case in point, as was the great amount of litter on the platforms and the stairs. On that Saturday evening the stairway to the street was so silted in with newspapers and other rubble that Beavers had been unsure of finding the steps and had clung to the railing in case his feet should miss one of them. He did not remember having done this before.

They were leaving more litter around than ever before.

But also:

*They* were not cleaning up the subways and streets.

(*They* had wasted no time in coming for the body of old Byles, though, and *They* had taken him away without a word. Then *They* had posted a bulletin . . .

*The calendar* indicated that it was mid-October, and the evening air should have been cool, clear, and bracing when he came up out of the subway at 23rd and Market, but it wasn't. There was carbon-monoxide in it and carbon dioxide and just plain carbon. There was something else. It was used air—even reused.

*They* were getting careless about the air. Even the sky . . .

Mr. Beavers lived at Mrs. Geppert's boarding-house on Market street. The air inside of that old-fashioned dwelling was much like the vitiated air of the streets, only more so: stiller, staler and polluted not only with Mr. Geppert's cigars but with Geppert himself, who silently scorned the fastidious

and who was past caring. Mr. Beavers had once dreaded coming back to the boarding-house on Saturday evenings because Geppert had chided him about working on Saturdays. "Why do you *do* it, Beavers? What are you saving it all up *for*?" Beavers had cut him short one particularly tense evening, but he could not remember with what comment. This much he knew: it was not with any cogent answer to the offensive question. Surely some kind of merit accrued. Was it time? Money? Something else?

In time he had thrust the question from the spotlight of his mind, at least, though it would not be expelled altogether. Some echo of it was evoked each evening when he saw Geppert, whom he despised. Mr. Geppert had no function. He did no work of any kind and he slept alone. Having abdicated function he had also relinquished all prerogatives of voice, except for an occasional word to Mr. Beavers.

This also was resented by Beavers—that he alone should be thought lowly enough to be spoken to by Geppert, and even addressed by his last name, but in fact Geppert had very little to say. Along with the ignominious privilege of sitting inert in *his* Morris chair in the parlour went that of selecting all television programmes and watching these all day long and much of the night.

There was no conflict with Mrs. Geppert concerning the TV, for that lady was totally preoccupied with gaining entrance to TV studios as a member of the "live" audience, especially for quiz programmes. Beavers had seen her face among the bland, bovine masks of the "live" audience ladies, but it was always hard to distinguish her from the rest, with their pastry-fed look, child-like eyes swimming euphorically behind rimless glasses, anachronistic bobby-soxer enthusiasm. *They* turned it on and off as the script required. Perhaps *They* had installed shockers in the seats. More likely *They* merely selected highly suggestible types—unintelligence tests, possibly. One thing was certain: *They used the same ladies over and over and over again.* Nothing changed. *They* didn't actually come from anywhere.

Geppert was in *his* Morris chair when Mr. Beavers entered the house. The TV was giving forth the painful falsetto banalities which were directed downwards at the kiddies of the Nation by *Geeko and his Friends*, sponsored by *Vita-Shards*, the fortified lemon-flavoured dry cereal. Geppert

would watch it with the same unchanging attention with which he would subsequently favour *Frontier Bondsman* sponsored by . . . who was it now? Last year it had been *Vita-Nuggets*, the dietary supplement for growing children. Same programme. Same stories. All reruns. *They had no new material*. No one was writing, acting, producing, composing, arranging . . . anything. All tape or wire or something let out of bottles. Only quizzes were "live."

Geppert was eating something out of a tinfoil tray. He did not take his eyes from the grey screen when Mr. Beavers came in, but indicated the kitchen with his thumb.

"The wife's out. Dinner inna oven."

Why did the man always have to be the *same*, thought Mr. Beavers as he washed up for "dinner." One could ignore the man, perhaps, but how escape his ambiance? It was not the one, grubby, inconsiderable individual that sometimes made you want to light fires and claw down walls; it was drifts of rumpled newspapers, grey undershirts, mustiness in clothes, upholstery, carpets—cigar ends in the toilet. (And even that homely convenience seemed now to lack the vitality to flush completely. *They were skimping on the water pressure. Cut off . . .*

"Dinner," which had cooled enough so that Mr. Beavers could remove it from the oven without burning himself, was Mother Darb's All-Meat Hackettes with Gr. Peas and Fr. Fr. Pot. One was forewarned of this by the lettering on the placental covering which had to be removed somehow without spilling the contents.

Mr. Beavers could hear the gunplay of *Frontier Bondsman* in the parlour and so decided to eat his "dinner" right there in the kitchen. He had no intention of lingering over it, not that it was what could be called a revolting experience exactly. Such food merited no such strong language. But there was no joy in it either.

He was not so obviously hungry as he was simply aware that it was after five o'clock. He would eat it and he would not then be hungry. It would be as though *They* had somehow taken the measure of one's stomach at mean postprandial distension and adjusted the amount of food, allowing for expansion, to fit the space as precisely as a piston fits into a cylinder. Beavers had once tried to imagine brown hands picking such Gr. Peas from a vine, or field-hands in bright

shirts bending to pluck the Fr. Fr. Pot. from freshly turned earth—all under an open, sun-cleansed sky—but the image would not connect with the plastic-encysted reality, and it kept fading until it would have been just as easy to accept that the food came from another planet or another time.

To what extent had the entire outer world where things and creatures lived, grew and “came from” dissolved and sloughed away? If one were tempted to speculate about such as the All-Meat Hackettes, perhaps it was not such a bad thing at that. Meanwhile the present contained nonce-realities which you accepted in the same spirit and by means of the same inner mechanism that enabled you to agree that movie characters on the screen in the other room were doing heroic things in the here and now, notwithstanding that the heroes wore vests and hard straws, made pursuits and get-aways in towering cars with running-boards, and with slouch-hatted heroines conversed in a language out of the ice-cream parlours of the early nineteen-thirties.

The food had no origin more than a block away. It was from nowhere. It conveyed nothing to your body or spirit beyond its own tasteless self—no fecund earth, no fieldhand laughter, no bustling kitchens—and it sent you nowhere except, in due course, to the bathroom with its reluctant facility. It would not change you; you would neither wax nor wane from having partaken of it, neither would it warm you. Nothing would change.

The pause after dinner, never a cheerful epoch in the best of times Beavers could remember, now revealed itself too obviously as a window on nothingness. Prospects for the hours ahead—never mind how many—were not merely depressing now, but almost menacing. It was part of this queasy business of starting to *notice things*. Beavers sat with his elbows propped on the kitchen table, and over the nasal aggressions of the *Frontier Bondsman* and the sporadic phlegm-rattlings of Geppert in the other room, he managed to think. It was a terrible mistake.

Suppose you wanted to talk to somebody—really talk?

Geppert was out: He didn't. He had nothing worth saying and a lifetime accumulation of wax in his ears; Mrs. Geppert was pleasant enough, but she didn't hear you. She just rolled her big, vague, swimmy eyes at the ceiling and said

something like "Oh my yaaaa-aa-aaasss!" — her mind removed to some Western Paradise of gleaming new refrigerators and suave mc's.

The men in the office were out, except of course for the communication demands of Business—tightly limited by its very nature. They were all your superiors, hence forbidding and unapproachable, or they were in every imaginable sense your inferiors, like that young pustule Rizzio with his cracks about *slots* and things. You did not talk to the women in the office for fear that they would answer you. Where did these women come from?

*They* must have selected them with a view to insuring stasis. These women would never leave or be borne away from Albumin Ltd. by anybody—not except in the sense that poor old Byles was borne away. They had the heads and voices of big, dusty carnivorous birds. Everything they did or said—and they did everything with an angry clatter—advertised their misanthropy, but when one did venture some coyness—it happened sometimes that they would roll their codfish eyes and say things like "I'll saaay!" or "You said it, kid!"—you were doing well not to vomit. The population would not increase because of these women. If, in a fit of morbid whimsy, you tried to think of them as females, a sharp antisexual pang would stab at and suffuse your loins. It was a real physical sensation, much like a fever settling in the vitals. So you were celibate.

*They* must have sent scouts out to recruit these women, *but when? From what place?* Never and nowhere, obviously. They had always been there, like Albumin, Ltd., the grey building in which its offices were, the subway, Market Street, Mrs. Geppert's boarding-house, Geppert, *Frontier Bondsman*, All-Meat Hackettes w. gr. peas & fr. fr. pot., drifts of grey newsprint, cigar-ends in a constipated john . . . and a *clerk named Beavers*.

You never went out. The movies, like the television, showed only "film classics"—three on the bill, sometimes, and rarely one of any merit when it was new. Westerns starring heroes who had long since died or gone into "semi-retirement," which is to say, they were now wistful old elevator operators somewhere. Or "*I Was a Teen-age Clothing Fetishist*." That sort of thing. The movie house two blocks down on Market was also a gathering place for young

punks. Beavers made no effort to conceal his fear and dislike of these superfluous creatures. It was tolerable to think that there were truly desperate men and even professional criminals pursuing their unpleasant work in the dark places of the city, but the young punks were without motive or purpose. They did not go there to see films but merely to stand there dredging their pants pockets and menacing passers-by. As Beavers thought about them, one observation emerged from all the others and burned behind his eyes like the after-image of a garish neon sign.

*They had no place to go.*

Now he knew what his thoughts would look like if he could stand aside and watch them move. They were glass marbles hurled against a polished stone floor. Compact and discrete as they were, the thing they had in common was a single unyielding surface—something that would not be known. There were others—questions in search of answers; answers seeking questions—popping up from some inaccessible level of mind like the steel marbles in a pinball game, all waiting to be hurled against the Unyielding, each containing the mysterious possibility of ringing the unheard bell, turning on all the lights, earning the unknown and unimaginable Score.

The kitchen was unendurably small.

At one point, Mr. Beavers had to snatch his billfold from his back pocket and rummage through it in search of something by which to establish *his age*. It was not quite believable, nor was his tenure at Albumin, Ltd. quite believable. He'd worked there every day except Sundays, which he hated because they were mere prolongations of this hollow, echoing time after "dinner," and the idea of vacations was—had been—insupportable.

*He never went anywhere.*

The Office was nineteen blocks away on Market Street, but he knew only the extreme ends of the streets because he went by subway—Didn't everybody?

Was Market Street more than nineteen blocks long? Of course it was. Why would you suggest that it wasn't? Why?

Did any other streets cross Market Street? Of course they did!

Didn't they?

And what do you mean "The *same* cars and taxis, the *same* people walking, staring straight ahead past you or looking at the pavement as they hurried along to . . ." What do you mean *where*?

The living room was much too small too. The ceiling was too low, the walls were too opaque, and besides, Geppert was in it, and *Frontier Bondsman* and the general staleness. You could almost see it now. It was like something coagulating on the surface of the eyeballs.

For what did you account? Now *that* was a stupid question. The vouchers came down from Miss Cloggett's office and you checked them against the records from the Dispersing Department, then entered the totals in the . . .

Totals of what? What do you mean, "just sending arithmetic problems back and forth"? *Totals*, that's all . . .

*Frontier Bondsman* was waving to "all his friends out there" now as he rode away on his horse, Marcus. The man and the animal were silhouetted against the sky.

Sky. Have you ever actually *seen* a sky—an open sky? An horizon? On Market Street? Nonsense. Everybody knows what a sky is. A sky is light. There is a stream of electrons from a cathode, and these impinge against a fluorescent surface. It's all inside a thing like a bottle.

Of course there was such a thing as sky! They had sky between the Second National Trust Building and the Albumin Building. They used to change it with the seasons. Lately *They'd* been letting it get sort of crumby. It must still be there, though. Must!

Mr. Beavers paused in the hallway long enough to put on his suit coat. It was not cool outside. It was supposed to be, but *They* hadn't changed it yet.

"You never go out!" whined Mr. Geppert. He didn't stir from his chair—he wasn't *that* surprised—but he did register surprise. It had never happened before.

The streets were not as dark as Beavers had expected them to be. They should be dark by now, but everything was lighted up. Too much, actually. The air, as he had expected, had not changed. For the first time he noticed the continuous rustling sound in the streets and identified it for what it was. It was the sound of people walking through tons and tons of waste paper. That figured.



The glass-marble thoughts had not penetrated their target yet, but their flight was not random now; they became as a stream of machine gun bullets—concerted.

He walked past the theatre (*The Sheepman's Revenge—I Was a Teen-age Indigent—Selected Short Subjects*) almost hoping that one of the young bums under the marquee would start something. None did, as it happened, but a couple of them stared as he went by. He knew that he was walking at a pace they would think strange—too fast and too purposeful in contrast to other people on the street, who just bumbled along with their eyes focussed on nowhere. When he turned the corner into a darker side-street he heard one of them shout "You'll be sorrr-ree!"

The paper got worse after he'd gone half a block, and up ahead he saw what appeared to be obstructions. But beyond these there was light. *Light*—great and diffuse, filling the sky! (See—there *is* a sky. You can almost see it.)

Under a street-lamp on a corner stood a policeman. He had seen the officer before, even nodded to him in passing, but they had never exchanged words. People didn't.

"Are you really sure you want to go over there, Mr. Beavers?"

"Is there a law?" asked Beavers, not stopping. The policeman shook his head sadly but made no move to stop him. Strange. How could one cop know the names of everyone living in an area like this? Certainly he, Mr. Beavers of Albumin, Ltd., was of no extraordinary interest to The Law.

Within two blocks the paper was springy underfoot, so deep had it drifted. It was darker too and so impossible to tell how deep. Sometimes his feet would encounter terrifying depths in the trash and once he floundered completely. While struggling to get upright again his hand grazed something furry. It was a dead dog. And now he heard other rustlings—not of people walking, but of rats. He saw a couple of them and up ahead he could see the eyes of dozens of them peering from window ledges and from under drifted paper, red points of reflected light.

He seemed to be struggling uphill over the trash, but the reality of it didn't reach him until he blundered into a large object which was shaped like one of those Mongolian *chortens* he remembered seeing in a movie. It was a moment

before he realised that it was only a street-lamp. It was odd how such a familiar object suggested something so outlandish when seen at this range and angle. It was not lighted, of course, or the fantastic notion would never have come to his mind. The familiar-unfamiliar object, the rustling of rats, the faint, steamy warmth coming up from the tons of litter underfoot all conspired to throw him into panic, but he kept floundering straight ahead without looking to either side. There was light up there—a vast, open horizon. Never mind that no map of the city he'd ever seen admitted of such a possibility. What had maps to do with this? What real meaning had any map, geography book, old issue of the *National Geographic* or corny filmed travelogue *ever had*? Where was the connection?

Now he saw a man staggering towards him over the dunes of discarded stuff—the leaves and husks of other days (or weeks? Months? Longer? Oh, surely not!). Common drunk, most likely. His arms were outstretched and he had a foolish

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grin on his face. Oh hell! He was going to pretend that he knew him . . . an old friend. To make a touch. But the man went right past Beavers, arms still spread, and he wasn't smiling at all. He was weeping like a child. What was he whimpering? To hell with him!

Now he could see other people standing silhouetted against that wonderful light. Were those clouds? Luminous coloured clouds? And why were those people holding their arms up like that and shaking their fists at the sky? Lunatics perhaps, or members of some far-out cult.

Funny thing about those clouds. They were unlike any old memory of clouds that he was able to summon. They moved, but they seemed undecided about their direction of drift. Did clouds move one way and then the other? And the wind. *Where was the wind?*

There wasn't any. Hadn't been as long as anyone could remember.

Then Mr. Beavers ran right into the transparent wall.

"All right now, Mr. Beavers. All right! No use pounding on it like that. No use screaming at 'em either. Come home now, Mr. Beavers. You know me. Hanrahan from the neighbourhood."

The big cop held on to Beavers' wrists, but it wasn't easy. Beavers was beyond talking sense to, but if you talked at 'em gently they quieted down most of the time. This was the lousy part of the night's duties—fetching the Wanderers off the Wall. Other policemen wrestled with other hysterical citizens and one by one dragged them down over the drifted trash to a patrol parked in the street below.

Beavers collapsed, sobbing, out of breath, and Hanrahan picked him up bodily. He wasn't very heavy, and Hanrahan was one of the strong ones. The big cop talked angrily to the darkness.

"And such a nice, peaceable little gent, too. Dammit to hell! Why do they have to wander? Why do they get curious? They could go on about their lives for years and never have to know about the faces . . . never know about *Them* and their lousy Wall."

—Will Worthington

*The one place a strange talent would be  
of great worth would be in a circus—  
providing that it made money for the  
owners.*

# P A R K Y

BY DAVID ROME

---

Drop Parky into a crowd anywhere and he'd stand out like a Roman nose in Basutoland. Tall and excessively thin, with eyes like twin tail-lights—that was Parky. But get him alone, start a conversation, and he'd seem to shrink a foot. His voice was high-pitched, like a woman's ; his babywhite hands never stopped moving.

He was a seer, and I owned him. Leastways, I owned an hour of his time Mondays to Saturdays when he'd sit up there on his rostrum and drone through his act.

Sundays, Parky was free ; but he never went anywhere. He'd loll around my caravan drinking warm beer, telling me I should be paying him double his wage. His red eyes would glow and his fingers would tap out a melancholy tune on the side of the can.

"Listen," I said once. "Your act is deader than Dodo."

Dodo was a high-wire, no-net, artist I once had.

So Parky would tell me then that because I wasn't paying him enough he wasn't getting enough to eat.

"Reading the future takes energy, Charlie."

Then he'd finish his beer, poke around in the fridge until he found a leg of chicken, and start chewing it for its energy.

"Look, Parky," I said. "You read the future, eh? Well, read it now. See any raise in the ether? Any big money about to materialize?"

He didn't, and I knew it. His act wasn't worth half what I was paying him now. I opened another can and avoided his eyes.

"I could always go elsewhere," he said.

Like hell he could. I'd tried to shuffle him out of my hand months ago, but nobody else was having any.

"Don't make me laugh," I said. "And have a beer."

He took the huff at that. He grabbed the can I was holding out to him, mumbled a word or two under his breath, and off he went. I never saw him again that day. I wrote up my accounts, put the books away in my safe, and started out on my Sunday check of the fairground.

I was halfway around, with two kids and a stray dog to my credit, when I first saw the little guy with yellow hair. Just a glimpse. There, then gone. I changed my direction and went after him.

Rounding a tent, I caught sight of him again. He was walking towards Parky's pitch, his bright hair shining like a halo under the afternoon sun.

"Hey!" I called out.

He turned slowly. Neatly pressed suit; collar-and-tie. He was well dressed. He waited until I was closer, then he said, "Yes?"

Funny that. I'd thought he was little; when he spoke, though, he seemed taller than I was.

"Look," I said carefully. "I don't want to be unpleasant."

An up-and-down line creased his brow. He stared at me.

"The fact is—ah—the fairground is closed."

Silence.

"Sunday, you know."

He spoke then, very softly, without malice. "I'm not certain I understood your first remark."

Peculiar accent he had. Some kind of foreigner. I retrospected. First remark? "I don't want to be . . ."

"Unpleasant?" The question came sharply.

"That's right."

He sighed gently. "Ahhh!" Then he said frankly, "I like your system down here."

My heart warmed suddenly. "Like it?" I turned in a slow circle, taking in the tents and caravans under a blue sky. "Yes I suppose it's not a bad layout. You're in the entertainment world, then?"

"No," he said. "Government."

Well, you can understand that this rocked me a little. I mustered up my talking-to-big-brass tone and said politely, "Local MP?"

"No," he said. "IGC. Inter-Galaxy."

Some kind of European was my guess. Anyway, I was beginning to wonder about something else. The main gate had been locked, so how had he got in? I looked at his immaculate suit. Kids crawl through the holes, and performers have their own keys. He wasn't a performer, and he hadn't been doing any crawling.

"How—"

He cut me short. "I'm looking for Ephraim Parkinson," he said.

For Ephraim Parkinson. That stumped me for a moment. But sometime in the past I had seen that name scratched out on a contract.

"For Parky?" I said.

"Yes—for Ephraim Parkinson. You can direct me?"

Well, I was able to direct him all right. I pointed out Parky's pitch to him, and off he went. It wasn't until he was yards away that I remembered to ask him how he'd got in.

He turned when I called out the question.

He smiled brightly.

"Oh, I came over the gate," he said.

In my business you don't let anything worry you. There are funnymen in every walk of life, and if they're from the government I leave them alone.

I finished my rounds without further incident and went back to my caravan. I had a drink, read the papers, turned on the radio, turned it off. Then I went to sleep.

If Parky was in trouble it was his lookout.

Next morning I was up at ten. I was shaving when Parky came in. He didn't say anything. He sat down in one of my chairs and watched me scraping the razor around my face.

"That's a fine, well-fed face you've got, Charlie," he said finally.

I wiped the razor, rinsed my face, and mopped it dry. "Thanks, Parky," I said.

He watched me, eyes blinking slowly.

"You know," he said. "I once weighed a hundred and ninety."

"Too much," I said. But I knew he was getting at something. As I pulled my shirt over my head I said, "What's eating you today?"

His long fingers were picking at his sleeves.

"We've been together a long time, Charlie."

This I knew.

"But I've never had a raise, Charlie."

I knotted my tie and watched him in the mirror.

"You've never had a wage-cut either, Parky."

I saw his red eyes spark. Suddenly he seemed to reach a decision in his own mind. He got to his feet.

"Charlie—I've got to ask you for a raise. If you can't give me a raise I'll be—" He hesitated, then said it :

"I'll be leaving."

I didn't move a muscle. "Leaving?"

"That's right." He seemed embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Charlie, but I've had another offer."

I sat down. I smiled across at him. Every move was calculated now. For months I'd been trying to shake Parky off my lists—but this was something different. If a performer gets an offer, then somebody thinks that performer is worth something. And if you've still got all your screws, this starts you thinking. What had I missed in Parky? What did he have that I hadn't seen?

"Parky," I said. "We'll have to talk about this."

He shook his head grimly. "I can't talk about it, Charlie. I've been offered another job at a higher rate of pay. That's all there is to it. I can't tell you who. I can't tell you where."

"Can't? Or won't?"

He didn't answer me. Just shook his head.

"Look," I said. "Give me until after the show tonight."

He nodded, satisfied. "That's fine, Charlie."

"You won't do anything rash?"

He shook his head like a child. I wondered if he realized that he was legally bound to me. Unless I gave him the O.K. he couldn't go anywhere. I could hold him to his contract if I had to.

But I wouldn't do that to the old fraud.

He went off down the steps, beaming, and I opened a beer, gulped it down, and started thinking.

Who the hell was after Parky? That was the first question. Nobody wants psi minds these days. Science has proved that the Power is so much s.f. It's the equivalent of the headless woman nowadays.

I wondered if the yellow-haired guy had anything to do with it. What did he call his department? IGC? Something connected with government. And what the hell had he meant about 'unpleasant'?

Angrily I tossed the empty beer-can into a corner and pulled on my coat. I locked the door of the caravan behind me and crossed the battered stretch of grass that separated my place from the rest of the fairground.

The remainder of the morning was spent in futile questioning. Nobody else had been approached. Nobody else had seen the guy with yellow hair. Finally, after lunch, I decided that all I could do was watch Parky's act. If he had something new, I would spot it.

Accordingly, with two cans of beer and a plate of sausage-and-mash under my belt, I made my way over to Parky's tent at about seven o'clock. There was a handful of people sown over the wooden benches, all of them looking around without interest, or watching a couple of kids who were trying to pull down the pale-blue curtain that screened Parky's rostrum.

The dim yellow lights were shining uncertainly on the muddy grass inside the tent, and somewhere behind his curtain Parky was playing the harmonica while he changed into his robes.

I sat down at the back of the tent, looking around. There was no sign of the guy with yellow hair. The spectators were an ordinary looking bunch. I would've bet my profits that none of them were talent scouts.

Five minutes went by, and the harmonica rose on a weird note, and fell silent. Quite suddenly, the lights went out. A girl in the second row giggled, of course, and for a moment the sound caught my attention. I almost missed the entry of two men who slipped into their seats unobtrusively in the half-darkness. Then Parky flung his curtain open with a flourish and the light from the rostrum fell on the hair of one of the men.

Government my pink eye. Yellow Hair was after Parky.

Almost in the same instant my eyes switched back to the tall, thin figure on the rostrum. I didn't want to miss anything. So Parky *did* have something. So what the hell was it?



An hour later later I was still asking myself the same question. Parky read the minds of two mindless youths ; he foretold the futures of half a dozen seedy couples. But hell ! The whole act was corn. His patter was feeble. His stage manner was laughable.

When it was over I ducked out quick because I didn't want the embarrassment of seeing the guy with yellow hair turning Parky down. It was raining outside—a fine drizzle. I walked back to my caravan through the milling crowds with that rain slanting down into my face and Parky's troubles in my mind.

I couldn't give him a raise—he was already operating at a loss. And after tonight's performance he wouldn't be getting his offer. If one had been made, it was going to be withdrawn fast. I knew the business. I knew no one would want Parky now.

It was sometime after eight when I reached the caravan. I went inside and shut the door. I stripped off my wet clothes, put on my dressing-gown and started to make supper. I turned on the radio and got some soft music playing.

The hell with the whole business, I thought. The hell with Parky and his lousy act, and the hell with the whole damned fairground.

Then there was a knock at the door.

I thought it would be Parky, but it wasn't. It was the guy with yellow hair. He stood outside, dripping. The rain, I saw, was heavier now.

"Come in," I said. And in he came. He pushed past me purposefully and turned, facing me. Now he was between me and my desk. I had my back to the door. I closed it.

"I'm sorry to intrude," he said quickly.

"Not at all," I said. His dress was still very gentlemanly. His tie was knotted neatly. He carried an umbrella.

"I understand that you're Parkinson's manager," he said in his precise English. He gestured faintly with his hand. "This is correct ?"

"That's right—Yikes !"

I gagged. My eyelids peeled back like sprung traps.

During that little gesture, his dainty feet enclosed in his dainty shoes had risen ! Perceptibly—unmistakably—they had left the floor !

He looked down and realized what was wrong. He touched a hand to his waist, under his coat. He descended, unperturbed.

"Gravity Variation," he explained. "Plays the dickens with our AG belts."

I sat down heavily on the bed.

"Now," he said briskly, "to business." He took a seat on the arm of a chair, crossed his impeccably tailored knees, and went on: "You must realize that *our* world is not your world. You yourself once said to me that you didn't wish to be unpleasant. On my world, Mr. Cot, everyone wishes to be unpleasant. Our civilization has advanced until it is chaos. Our government has broken apart. We *need* Ephraim Parkinson!"

I gaped.

"As his manager, of course, you will expect compensation. Perhaps this"—he extended one arm gracefully and the point of his umbrella touched the steel door of the safe—"will be recompense enough?"

He smiled. "We took the opportunity earlier this evening, Mr. Cot, of placing your reward in the safe. You will open it when I am gone."

"Why Parky?" I croaked.

He smiled again. "Because Ephraim Parkinson is the only man in the Universe who actually *can* read minds, Mr. Cot. He will be of inestimable value to my government when our Peace Talks begin."

Then he waved his umbrella cheerfully, stepped out into the rain without raising it, and was gone.

Apparently it never rained on Parky's new world.

I got around to opening that safe, you know. And by now most of you will have been out to the fairground to see the 'Snuffler' they left me.

It's small red, and furry. It eats glass, nails, paper—anything. It has three eyes, breathes fire, and can dance the hula on one leg.

But you know something. I'd give any amount of 'Snufflers' to get old Parky back.

We could do with a guy like him on Earth these days.

—David Rome

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